Meditation and Spiritual Life

तन्नोहंसः प्रचोदयात्

Swami Yatiswarananda

MEDITATION AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

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FOREWORD

I am glad to learn that Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Bangalore, is publishing this book — Meditation and Spiritual Life *— compiled from the talks and writings of Swami Yatiswarananda.*

Swami Yatiswarananda was a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order, who contributed much to spiritual life by his talks, articles and ministration, in India and abroad. The present book deals in detail with the spiritual ideal and its practice as exemplified in the life of Sri Ramakrishna, and also practical hints on spiritual life.

I hope this publication will inspire spiritual aspirants and help them in their struggle to attain the Truth.

SWAMI VIRESWARANANDA
President
Ramakrishna Math and
Ramakrishna Mission

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

'Be bold and face the truth', said Swami Vivekananda. Here is a book which teaches you how to do this. Here is a book for the guidance of sincere spiritual aspirants who have heard the divine call, who have in response to it accepted God-realization or, what amounts to the same, Self-realization as the highest goal of life, who consider no sacrifice too great, no price too high for the attainment of that goal.

Interest in Yoga and other forms of Indian spirituality has in recent times become world-wide. Disillusioned with the promises of institutional religions and the glamour of science and technology, recoiling from the evils of a materialistic culture, countless people in the West are seeking a new orientation to life and reality. And a number of books and periodicals are being brought out in India and abroad to meet this cultural need. Not all these books, however, have equal authenticity or value. Nor is it true that all those who turn to oriental thought are genuine seekers of the ultimate Truth. Many are in search of an intellectual framework which suits their thoughts and actions. Some others are attracted to the miraculous, the exotic, spooky elements of religion. But there is always a small group of sincere aspirants who never stop short of genuine spiritual realization and fulfilment. It is to meet the spiritual needs of this less obtrusive but more important group that this book has been designed.

The author of this book, Swami Yatiswarananda, was well known during his lifetime as an illumined soul, an eminently capable spiritual director, a most affable and gentle personality endowed with a deep understanding of human problems and great love and sympathy for all people. A much respected senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order, and later on its Vice-President, the Swami was one among the foremost disciples of Swami Brahmananda, the great disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. A brief account of the life of the Swami and his reminiscences of his *guru* have been included in the beginning of this book.

In 1933, in response to the earnest request of Wolfram H. Koch and a few other German students of Vedānta, the Order sent Swami Yatiswarananda to Wiesbaden, Germany, from where three years later the Swami shifted the centre of his activities to Switzerland — Geneva, Lausanne, Zurich, Campfer and St. Moritz. He also made occasional visits to France and Holland. Not a preacher in the conventional sense of the term, the Swami laid greater stress on practice than on theory. During his six years of stay in Europe, he tried to organize small circles of sincere spiritual aspirants who were eager to attain Self-realization and were willing to bear the rigours of the spiritual path. He took classes for them on books like the *Spiritual Teachings of Swami Brahmananda*, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the *Uddhava Gītā*, the *Nārada Bhakti-Sūtras* and selections from the Upaniṣads. But, of the spiritual fare that he laid out for his European Students the *pièce de résistance* was the *Spiritual Teachings of Swami Brahmananda*. This book was the trend-setter, and it may even be stated that all his class talks given in Germany and Switzerland were an elaboration of the teachings of his own master.

Through the influence of the Swami many lives were changed, and several men and women seemed to find some deep spiritual fulfilment. Though none of these early students became members of the Ramakrishna Order or took monastic vows, the Swami hoped that many of them would in due course become living channels for the diffusion of Vedānta and the ideals of the Ramakrishna Movement in that part of the globe. With this end in view he tried to train them in an exclusively spiritual way of life, and gave them detailed instructions regarding the practice of strict chastity, detachment, renunciation, purity in inter-personal relationships, strength of mind, complete self-surrender to the Divine, prayer, meditation and, above all, seeing God in all men and women. Himself fresh from the spiritual arena, and filled with a divine fervour to share the experiences of his own exalted life with those sincere aspirants whom destiny had entrusted to his spiritual ministration, the Swami exhorted his students to practise intense meditation and make an all-out effort to realize the ultimate goal of life. A measure of the zeal and earnest response of his students could be seen in the meticulous care with which some of them took down verbatim notes of these class talks.

The pioneering work of Swami Yatiswarananda in Europe ground to a halt with the eruption of the second World War, but a valuable legacy of his sacrifice has come down to us in the form of these notes. Selections of these were later on published in *Vedanta Kesari* during the years 1938-40. Some of the notes were translated into French by Jean Herbert and published under the title *Swami Brahmananda: Discipline monastique, commentaires de Swami Yatiswarananda*. The original notes of all the talks the Swami gave in Europe — the files of which are preserved in the archives of Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Bangalore — form the main core of the present book, which is now being published more than twelve years after his demise.

In the year 1940 Swami Yatiswarananda left Europe and went to the United States where he opened a new Vedānta Centre in Philadelphia. The experience he had gained from his work in Europe and now his acquaintance with the American culture taught him that though a large number of people were attracted to the ideal of a contemplative life, few had the inner qualifications to actualize that ideal. The more than two hundred and fifty talks on as many themes that he gave in Philadelphia, the notes of which are preserved in the archives of Bangalore Ashrama, show a distinct change in his methods of teaching and spiritual direction, which became mellowed and less rigorous. Reasoning, self-analysis based on the then popular Freudian psychology, a balanced outlook on life and an attitude of acceptance, spiritualization of secular work and service of God in man, topped the list of priorities in the scheme of spiritual life that the Swami presented to his American students. He also started including in his talks humorous stories and anecdotes to illustrate his points or to relieve the strain of long listening. A few of these talks given in Philadelphia and others given later on in Bangalore, India, were brought together in the book, *The Adventures in Religious Life*, published a few years after the Swami's return to India.

In the present book we have included some materials from the Philadelphia talks, but the major portion consists of the notes of class talks given in Germany and Switzerland. As already pointed out, the spiritual instructions contained in these talks were meant for a small group of young men and women whom he wanted to train for an intensely spiritual life. The uncompromising tone of many of these instructions may appear to some of our readers to be too severe and the instructions, too difficult to practise. We are, however, publishing them in the hope that, on the other hand, those who are struggling hard in the spiritual path will get immense benefit from them. This is not a book of philosophy but a document of a lifetime's experiences of a spiritual genius. Let the reader exercise his common sense and take from it as much as he can actually put into practice. 'Time is an important factor', Swami Yatiswarananda once remarked. 'One must wait patiently till one sees one's way clearly by the grace of the Lord.' If this book serves to kindle the fire of aspiration in a few sincere hearts and enables them to follow the true path of spiritual life, we shall consider our labours amply rewarded.

After the publication of *The Adventures in Religious Life*, Swami Yatiswarananda expressed a wish to some of his disciples to bring out another book on practical spirituality which would give more detailed and intimate instructions on meditative life. He seemed to have entertained the idea of incorporating in it some of the Wiesbaden and St. Moritz class talks, and excerpts from some of his letters to his European students. We are now bringing out the present collection of most of his important spiritual instructions in the hope that it will bring to fruition his wish to a great extent. About half the matter in the book is now officially appearing in print for the first time. The other half is derived from articles previously published in various journals at different times.

Being a posthumous publication, it is difficult to know how the author would have liked to have its contents arranged. However, following his favourite way of classifying spiritual themes, we have divided the book into three parts with the titles 'The Ideal', 'Practice' and 'Experience.' Every seeker of

Truth must learn to order his life according to a definite pattern. He must first of all have a clear understanding of the goal he is striving for. A theoretical knowledge of the real nature of the soul, the universe and God, and their interrelationships is to be gained before one embarks on the spiritual journey. The purpose of Part I entitled 'The Ideal' is to help the aspirant in this task. Part II entitled 'Practice' is divided into two sections. The first section deals with the qualifications and preparations necessary for a life of intense prayer and meditation. Considering the great importance the author attached to this subject, we have allotted a considerably large space to it in the hope that it will act as a corrective to the modern tendency to minimize or overlook the need for strict discipline and purity of mind in meditative life. The second section gives an account of the actual spiritual techniques to be practised by aspirants according to their aptitude and stage of spiritual growth. Part III discusses the spiritual experiences that a persevering seeker is likely to be blessed with and also some of the psychological reactions that often come in the wake of such experiences. It concludes with brief accounts of the lives of some of the great saints of world religions. A fourth part brings together a number of stray thoughts of the author, mostly recorded at St. Moritz, Switzerland.

We have tried to preserve the thoughts of the author in their original form throughout the book. The informal conversational style of the class talks has been retained. But, for the sake of greater clarity and practical utility, we have rearranged the lines and paragraphs in the original published and unpublished papers so as to give greater coherence to ideas, and organic unity to the whole book. There is now a sequential development of ideas not only from the first chapter to the last, but also within each chapter. This reshuffling has also served to eliminate repetition of ideas to a great extent, but in a work of this kind some repetition is unavoidable and may even be a necessity. Many of the captions and subheadings found in the original papers have been retained, but new ones have been added wherever found necessary. The two chapters on the lives of saints included in the third part are based on an abridged version of a series of lectures on the subject given by Swami Yatiswarananda in Bangalore during 1956-58.

This book is not a systematic exposition of the philosophy of Hindu *sādhanā*. But it has its own distinct theoretical framework. Beneath the instructions, admonitions and practical hints lie embedded certain fundamental principles which the author found to be universally true in the course of his years of effort and experience. Some of these presuppositions which form the foundation of the whole book have been codified in the form of what he often called 'the laws of spiritual life'; they are as follows:

1. Whatever we take to be real for the time being, affects our whole personality, thoughts, emotions and actions. Our whole being responds to this reality.
2. Our concept of reality depends upon our concept of ourselves; that is, man's conception of God evolves with the evolution of his consciousness.
3. Spiritual awakening is the transformation of one's consciousness, which means moving from a lower centre to a higher centre of consciousness.
4. Though distinct from the moral imperative, spiritual aspiration must be supported by it. The practice of concentration (meditation), if not preceded and followed by purification of mind and sublimation of instincts, is likely to lead the aspirant astray.
5. Each aspirant must first understand where he is and begin from there; but making the best use of the protection and support given to him during the early years of his life, he should outgrow them and stand on his own legs, drawing his sustenance more from the Divine than from men and institutions. This is the law of spiritual growth. It means that an aspirant can move forward in the spiritual path only if he is prepared to abandon the supports which helped him in the earlier stage.
6. The realization of the Absolute — the transcendental Reality — lies always through the realization of the

immanent divine Principle. The holy Personality (*Iṣṭa Devatā*) is a manifestation of this divine Principle.

7. The more our consciousness expands, the more we see the Divine in all people and the more spiritual we become.

Meditation and Spiritual Life is the first important book in English published by Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Bangalore, of which Swami Yatiswarananda was the President for fifteen years (1951-66). Its publication has been made possible, in the first place, through the devoted care with which some of his students had kept an accurate record of his talks and personal instructions. The gratitude of the readers of this book naturally goes to them. The generous monetary contributions made by a large number of devotees in India and abroad have served to meet a major part of the cost of printing this book, and to all of them we extend our thanks. Our thanks also go to many others who helped the publication in several ways on several occasions.

We send forth this book with the fervent hope that it will prove to be an unfailing source of inspiration, guidance and solace to numerous spiritual aspirants in the East and the West, in their journey from the unreal to the Real; from darkness to Light, and from death to Immortality.

THE SECOND EDITION

The first edition was warmly received by spiritual aspirants in India and abroad, and its five thousand copies were exhaustd in just three years. The second edition is now being brought out to meet the growing demand for it.

In this second edition a new chapter, 'The Guru and Spiritual Guidance', which originally appeared in the March 1982 issue of *Prabuddha Bhārata,* has been included; besides, a few more teachings, gathered mostly from the author's letters to his disciples, have been added here and there, and the Index has been revised.

THE SIXTH EDITION

We are extremely happy to place before our readers this new edition of *Meditation and Spiritual Life*. The merit of this massive work stands paralleled only by a few others of its kind. What marks this work as a perfect guidebook to "spiritual life and meditation" is the extensive coverage of the subject *pari passu* with a soul-searching view into its important aspects. The sublime topics have been couched in a language that is lucid and simple and, moreover, the words herein bear a stamp of authority, for the author was known to be a distinguished person for his lofty attainments in this domain. For such reasons and more the book has gone through five editions till date, amply vouching for its popularity among the sincere practitioners of spiritual life and meditation.

Since the publication right has been made over to us, it gives us great joy to present this book to the readers, that too with the fervent hope that it will continue to inspire and guide spiritual aspirants not only to begin but also to successfully march ahead on this path. We are grateful to Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore, for transferring the copyright of the book to us.

Mayavati PUBLISHER
7 August 2007

SWAMI YATISWARANANDA

Swami Yatiswarananda, known as Suresh Chandra Bhattacharya in his pre-monastic life, was born on Wednesday, 16 January 1889 in his maternal uncle's house in a village named Nandanpur in the district of Pabna which is now in Bangla Desh. His father, Ishan Chandra Bhattacharya, a teacher in a Government School, was a devout Brahmin and his mother Bidhumukhi Devi too was a pious lady, and he was fortunate in being born in a religious family.

He had his early education in Jalpaiguri and Bogra and passed the entrance examination from a school in Rangpur. He studied at Rajsahi and Cooch Behar colleges and afterwards at the Bangabasi College, Calcutta. Finally, he got admitted into the Presidency College, Calcutta from where he passed the B.A. examination, securing a gold medal for having stood first in Sanskrit in the Calcutta University. He continued his post-graduate studies in Chemistry up to the sixth year, but did not come out successful, obviously because of his indifference to his studies. At this time, he was being filled with the spirit of renunciation as a result of his contact with the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna at the Belur Math. His parents naturally wanted him to lead a householder's life, but he plainly told his mother some day towards the end of 1911 that he was going to join the Ramakrishna Order to attain God-realization and that, if he failed in his mission, he would surely come back and accede to their wishes.

With the little money that his parents gave him he came straight to the Belur Math and joined the Order in 1911 at the age of 22. He was an initiated disciple of Srimat Swami Brahmanandaji Maharaj, one of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, and was invested with *sannyāsa* by him in 1917 at Madras.

In 1921 he became the Editor of *Prabuddha Bhārata*, in which capacity he continued for two years. Thereafter, he was made the President of the Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama at

Bombay for about a year. In 1926 he was appointed the President of the Madras Math and he continued so till 1933. In 1928 he was made a Trustee of the Belur Math and a member of the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission. At the invitation of a group of earnest souls, he was deputed to Wiesbaden in the Rhineland (Germany) where he arrived in November 1933. From the winter of 1935 to the end of 1938 he extended his activity to Switzerland, forming study circles at St. Moritz, and later at Geneva and other places, and also worked for several months at the Hague, in Holland, as also in Paris and London. In 1940, at the beginning of the Second World War, he left Germany and went to the U.S.A. There, in December 1942, he was able to start a Vedānta Centre at Philadelphia and was the head of that Centre up to 1949. He returned to India in 1950 from the U.S.A. via Europe. In 1951 he became the President of the Bangalore Ashrama, and in view of his sterling spiritual attainments, he was authorized by the Trustees of the Belur Math in 1952 to give initiation to spiritual aspirants. In 1962 he was elected Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

The Swami was well versed in eastern and western philosophies. He was an impressive speaker, a good writer, and was the author of *The Adventures in Religious Life, Universal Prayers, Divine Life, Way to the Divine, and Letters and Prayers.* His winning manners, feeling heart, catholic views, and spiritual attainments earned for him the admiration and devotion of a large number of friends and admirers, devotees and disciples, in India and abroad, whose lives were very much influenced by him. From about the middle of 1965 he was suffering from various physical ailments. He was taken to Belur Math for a change of climate, and treatment. He attained *mahāsamādhi* on 27 January 1966.

For some time before his passing away, he had been feeling that the end was approaching. He was often heard saying: 'Swami Brahmananda has taken away all power from me. There is no use of this body any longer. Better it is cast away.'

SWAMI YATISWARANANDA'S REMINISCENCES OF SWAMI BRAHMANANDA

In 1906, while reading in the F.A. class, in Calcutta, I had my first acquaintance with the life and thought of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Sri Ramakrishna's *Gospel* and Swamiji's *Rāja-yoga* came to my hands almost simultaneously. By studying these and other similar books I entered into a new realm of thought. At this time I resolved to take initiation from Swami Brahmananda and lead a religious life, but its materialization took some time.

After appearing for the F.A. examination in 1907, I went to Rajsahi to join the B.A. class there. After two years' stay there, I came again to Calcutta towards the end of the summer of 1909. Swami Brahmananda, having returned from Madras, was staying in Orissa at that time. It was in 1910 that I saw him for the first time during the birthday celebrations of Sri Ramakrishna. After the celebrations he left for Puri. At this time I went to Belur Math with my friend Sitapati (later Swami Raghavananda) and met the monks there. Since then, I started staying at Belur Math on Saturdays and Sundays. Swami Premananda, Swami Shivananda and other Swamis, by their love and affection, endeared me to themselves. Towards the end of 1910, when Sri Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda) came to Calcutta before the birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda, Swami Shivananda introduced me to him. I felt as if I had a special relationship with Sri Maharaj and I was overwhelmed with love and devotion towards him. It was not so with regard to other Swamis. In Calcutta and at the Belur Math I visited Sri Maharaj frequently and sometimes got the opportunity of doing a little bit of service to him. One day there was some celebration at Binod Babu's house. Many monks and devotees were present there. I was fanning Sri Maharaj with a big hand-fan. Suddenly he told me: 'Look, if the body and the mind are given to the world, the world destroys everything; but, if given to God, He keeps everything—body and mind— in good condition.' I had a great desire to become a monk and Sri Maharaj made this ideal shine brighter before me. One day I and a friend of mine went to Belur Math to meet Sri Maharaj when we heard that with Swami Premananda he had gone to Balaram Mandir (Balaram Bose's house in Calcutta). We therefore went to Balaram Mandir. Sri Maharaj asked my friend to show his palm to him. Having looked at it he said: 'Lust will be of some hindrance to you, but if Sri Ramakrishna wills, it will disappear.' Swami Premananda loved me. He requested Sri Maharaj to look at my palm also, but he did not do so. At this I felt sad at heart and thought that my friend had some possibility of monastic life while, perhaps, I didn't have even that.

A few days after this incident, as I was entering the Belur Math, Sri Maharaj's attendant saw me and said: 'Well, Sri Maharaj was telling us that you would become a monk.' This gave me a lot of mental strength and, in due course, I became a monk. My friend, however, had to enter householder's life. He became a high-ranked official, but remained a great devotee of the Master and disciple of the Holy Mother.

One day Sri Maharaj went to Dakshineswar with a big party in two boats. I also went with him. He was in wonderful spirits. He said, 'It is a great fortune to live at Dakshineswar even as a dog.'

When we sat with Sri Maharaj we felt as if there was a charmed circle around him and we had come within it. One day he revealed himself in a novel way to me. As he was strolling on the Math grounds, I felt as if he was a superhuman or divine personality.

Sri Maharaj blessed me with initiation in 1911. A few days afterwards he went to Puri when I wrote to him that I wanted to become a monk. He asked Swami Shankarananda to write to me that if I had enough mental strength why should I not go over there. I therefore went to Sri Maharaj at Puri in October that year and joined the holy Order. During this time Sri Maharaj got the worship of Devī Jagaddhātrī performed by me at the house of Atal Babu. Swami Turiyananda was the officiating priest and Swami Ambikananda was his assistant.

Kumārī Pujā (worship of a virgin as the goddess) was also performed. Thus he helped bring into my life a deep spiritual fervour shortly after I became a monk. Sometime later, Sri Maharaj asked me to go to Madras with Swami Sharvananda. Before going I requested him to impart some spiritual instructions. With great solemnity and intense compassion he said: 'Struggle! Struggle! Struggle.' This has been the keynote of my life— I feel as if his words are still ringing in my ears.

I am reminded of a few incidents that occurred during our stay at Puri. One day Atal Babu told Swami Sharvananda: 'What kind of monks you are! You have no occult powers.' Hearing this Sri Maharaj said: 'It is easy to get occult powers, but difficult to acquire purity of mind. It is this purity of mind that matters really.' Another day Sri Maharaj was ill—he had pain in the waist. On that day there was a special celebration at the Puri temple. Almost all of us thought that Sri Maharaj's attendant alone would do for looking after him and went to the temple. And after passing a good deal of time there when we returned after dusk, Sri Maharaj rebuked us rather sharply for our selfishness and said in the end: 'I do not expect anything from you. Only I wish you well, and whatever I tell you is for your welfare alone.' After that I took upon myself the work of attending on Sri Maharaj at night. One night he felt very hot and asked me to open the shutters. I was new to this work of personal service and was lacking in understanding too. So I could not think that it was necessary to close the shutters after a time. The next day Sri Maharaj felt feverish. At this I became very sad at heart. But Sri Maharaj not only didn't rebuke me himself, but also told others that I was a mere boy and did not know things well. None therefore told me anything about it, but I had my lesson all right.

I went to Madras towards the close of 1911 and was there for five years. I saw Sri Maharaj there again in 1916. I had to work hard as the manager of the Madras Math. Seeing me sitting on the manager's chair for hours together, he said one day: 'Have I sent you here to do this clerk's job?' He scolded me much and took Swami Sharvananda also to task, saying, 'Without giving this boy any opportunity for study etc., you are making him do the work of a clerk.'

Swami Hariharananda was Sri Maharaj's personal attendant. He used to ask me to get for Sri Maharaj good gingili oil from the market and I used to make enquiries and get the best oil available. Pointing to this, one day, Sri Maharaj said: 'Have I sent you here to enquire and find out where good gingili oil is available?' Taking all rebukes as expressions of his love and grace, and feeling in the heart of hearts that he was mine and I was his, I used to feel happy at all this.

During this time Sri Maharaj ordered me to pay special attention to study and contemplation and asked me to recite daily *Viṣṇusahasranāma*. By his grace the mind used to be in a very good state and the heart felt a sort of union with him and was filled with great elation.

Sri Maharaj was kind enough to take me to Kanya Kumari along with his party. I had never read the *Caṇḍī(Durgā-saptaśatī)* ceremoniously before. I didn't like the fighting and killing mentioned therein. I used to recite only the prayer hymns. Coming to know all this, Sri Maharaj scolded me and asked me to recite the entire *Caṇḍī* ceremoniously at least once a fortnight. He asked me to recite the *Viṣṇusahasranāma* and the *Caṇḍī* for three years. I did so for more than that time.

So as to avoid becoming conceited, I did not write articles or deliver lectures, and refrained from religious discussions etc. One day, at the Haripad Ashrama in Travancore, Sri Maharaj commandingly said: 'Tell others what you hear and learn from us.' Again, one day at Madras, he said: 'The habit of study must be made such that you will feel ill if you miss it any day. If the mind does not remain on a high spiritual plane, at least it would remain absorbed in studies — it won't come lower.' On another occasion he said: 'Why not write one article each week?' To this I said: 'What shall I write? No ideas come.' He then said: 'Learn to think deeply and you will find that it would be difficult to cope with the onrush of ideas.' Afterwards, by the grace of my *guru*, I never suffered from want of ideas. One morning, while we were at the Bangalore Ashrama, he showed me a few physical exercises and asked me to do them daily. I was already doing some indoor exercises and to them I added those shown by Sri Maharaj. He had told me more than once: 'Physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual progress have to go hand in hand.' After coming to Madras, Sri Maharaj himself suggested many a time that he would ordain me into *sannyāsa*. Other monks, however, advised me to go to him in advance and pray for *sannyāsa*. I went to him and like a fool, said: 'Maharaj, if you consider me fit, please be kind to initiate me into *sannyāsa*.' To this he affectionately said: 'None can be considered fit for *sannyāsa,* but I would initiate you into it.'

On the day of my *sannyāsa*, I felt that Sri Maharaj was vibrating with a wonderful spiritual fervour. After the *homa* etc., when I paid my obeisance to him, he put his hand on my head and I immediately had the experience of a vast Presence — as if he, the world and myself were merged in an infinite existence. He graciously gave me an idea of what a *guru* really was. Then I realized the truth of the hymn: 'Salutations to the *guru* who has made it possible to realize Him by whom this entire universe of movable and immovable objects is pervaded.'

That day, after nightfall, many of us sat round Sri Maharaj. Swami Sharvananda was also there. Sri Maharaj's mind was tuned very high spiritually. I thought that he would speak about spiritual practices and contemplation, but without doing so, pointing to me, he said: 'What spiritual practice will you do! Go from door to door and let people listen to the holy name of God. That in itself is a great *sādhanā.*' Calling Swami Sharvananda by name, he said: 'Sharvananda, these days I very much appreciate the attitude of Śrī Rāmānujācārya — helping everybody hear the name of God.' That day Sri Maharaj brought into me a new inspiration and dircted my thoughts into a new channel. That direction is still there. On account of this new inspiration received at Madras I began laying stress on study, meditation, etc. and started taking classes and speaking at meetings. It was later that I took to writing articles earnestly.

The construction of the new building of the Madras Math also reveals Sri Maharaj's divine Power. The old Math building having been damaged, the monastery had to be shifted to a rented house. Swami Sharvananda and ourselves could not make out at all how we would build the new house for the Math. Land, of course, had been bought earlier. Coming to Madras, Sri Maharaj said that he would lay the foundation of the new building and asked Swami Sharvananda to collect money, even to take some loan for the purpose. Help, however, came unexpectedly, and within eight months the entire building except the front hall was made ready for use. Sri Maharaj, after his return from Bangalore, and shortly after our initiation into *sannyāsa*, consecrated the new Math building.

On that day — the day of dedication of the new Math — I was performing the evening *ārati* of Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Maharaj was standing a little behind me. While performing the *ārati* I felt as if everything was filled by a great Presence. I perceived that great Presence in all the pictures and in Sri Maharaj as well as in everyone present as I was doing the *ārati*. Even now, when I try to perform *ārati* I get that feeling. This is a special blessing of Sri Maharaj. That same evening, we were sitting in front of Sri Maharaj on the terrace of the rented building. Sri Maharaj said: 'I fervently told Sri Ramakrishna: "They are just boys. How would they build a new house? Thou shouldst kindly make everything possible." And so, you see, by His grace, the new building has come up.'

At Madras I used to be preoccupied with various activities. I used to get very little time for studies or meditation. As soon as Sri Maharaj arrived at Madras, he understood that I needed a change. He wished that I should leave Madras and go to Bangalore. But I had no desire to go to Bangalore. But Maharaj knew that that was good for me. So he said one day: 'Fool! you don't understand your own interest! There is no need for you to stay at Madras any more — proceed to Bangalore.'

Earlier, Swami Nirmalananda had requested Sri Maharaj to send me to Bangalore. I had heard that Maharaj had also more or less agreed to it. In early summer of 1917 Sri Maharaj left for Puri. A few days later, I too left for Bangalore in obedience to Sri Maharaj's wish. While there, I was given to much spiritual practices and religious studies. At the Bangalore Ashrama I used to conduct the Sunday classes too. In late summer of the same year, I had enteric fever and had a severe burning sensation all over the body. I was admitted into a hospital. During this time an influenza epidemic was on. One morning an old man was brought in and placed in a bed next to mine. He had double pneumonia and was in a serious condition; by evening all was over with him.

I was experiencing great pain. But my mind was very clear then. There was no fear of death. But I did feel that it would be difficult to bear any increase in suffering. Death would have been more welcome. When such a thought arose in my mind, I had a vision of Sri Maharaj. He said: 'How can you die? You have yet to do Sri Ramakrishna's work!' Saying so, he disappeared. My mind was filled with a new fervour. Tears began to roll down my eyes profusely. There was no question of any fear of death; on the other hand, a wonderful peace and a sense of resignation came over me. And the disease too, took a turn for the better.

After spending more than a year at Bangalore and another year of spiritual practices at various places in the Madras Presidency, I went to Bhuvaneshwar to meet Sri Maharaj at the end of December 1919. There I got the rare privilege of spending a few days in his holy company. The construction of the Bhuvaneshwar Math was nearing completion at that time. It was during this period that, one evening, Sri Atal Maitra of Puri arrived with his first wife. The old man was very much downcast, filled with sorrow. Sri Maharaj asked Swami Varadananda to sing. Varadananda sang the song beginning:

> O mind, make thy refuge the feet of the
> Divine Mother who dispels all fears.

Hearing the song, and more than that by having the *darśan* of Sri Maharaj and hearing his words, the old man's face brightened and he was filled with joy. We all felt very happy at this transformation.

After a few days' stay at Bhuvaneshwar, Sri Maharaj sent me to Calcutta with Swami Gokulananda who was sick. From Calcutta I went to Belur Math where I spent a few months. During this time, in 1920, before Swamiji's birth anniversary, Sri Maharaj arrived at Belur. We all used to go and sit in his room and meditate, and chant various hymns.

My last *darśan* of Sri Maharaj was at Vārāṇasī in the year 1921, a few days before Swami Vivekananda's birth anniversary. Then I was staying with Swami Turiyananda. Sri Maharaj brought about a new spiritual current in the Vārāṇasī Sevashrama and Advaita Ashrama. At this time, he gave me, too, much spiritual inspiration. One day he enquired about my spiritual practices. I said: 'I feel as if there is no inner awakening. So I am not getting peace of mind. We have been born with some bad *saṁskāras* (mental impressions) and they prove to be hurdles to spiritual growth.' Maharaj replied: 'Don't think that way. Practise *japa* at the dead of night. Do *puraścaraṇa* (a ritual involving a particular number of *japa*). Inner awakening will come of its own accord.'

Another day I went to him, feeling restless in mind. Seeing me approaching, he got up and came towards me and gave me many instructions within a short time. He said: 'Your mind becomes restless only because you don't want to do what I tell you to do.' Placing his palm on my head, he blessed me and filled my heart with peace.

It was Sri Maharaj's desire that I should go to Māyāvatī and take charge of *Prabuddha Bhārata*. But he did not tell me anything himself. It was Swami Suddhananda and Swami Madhavananda who told me several times about my going to Māyāvatī. But I was not agreeable to this.

One morning, while I was with Swami Turiyananda, busy attending on him, I felt as if something was breaking down within me and a wail coming up from the depth of my mind. Tears also poured down the eyes. The more I wiped, the more the tears came. Along with it I noticed an attitude of self-surrender coming over me. I understood that it was the play of Sri Maharaj. He was graciously removing the obstinacy and the obstacles of my mind. By evening my mind settled down.

After this, one morning, as I went to pay my obeisance to him, he said: 'Look, they all wish that you should go to Māyāvatī and take charge of *Prabuddha Bhārata*.' He had already broken my stiffness. I therefore, without any hesitation, said: 'Maharaj, if you order, I would surely go.' Sri Maharaj was much pleased with my reply and blessed me. After this it was settled that I would go to Māyāvatī. One morning, after prostrating before him, I along with Swami Suddhananda, Swami Madhavananda and other monks sat near him. Sri Maharaj asked me at the very outset: 'How are your spiritual practices going on?' In reply, I said: 'There is much work to do. I do not get enough time.' To this he said: 'It's wrong to think there is no time because of work. It is due to the restlessness of the mind that one feels like that.' And this opened the flood-gates of Sri Maharaj's speech. With great feeling he said: 'One should prepare the mind by doing work and worship together.' These instructions are there in the 'Work and Worship' chapter of *The Eternal Companion*. These were addressed particularly to me. On that day he established a special relationship of love between myself, Swami Madhavananda and other brother monks. He said: 'Just as Madhavananda is dear to me so are you and others too.' When I think that all are dear to Sri Maharaj, then I also feel that all are dear to me as well. Sri Maharaj regarded his own disciples and those of the Holy Mother equally dear to him. He used to say that all had come to do Sri Ramakrishna's and Swami Vivekananda's work. One day, pointing specially to me, he said: 'By doing their work in this spirit, bondage can never come. Rather through it will come all progress — spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical. Surrender yourself at their feet; offer your body and mind to them; be as a slave unto them.' This and other instructions of Sri Maharaj have become the stay of my life.

I had a desire to talk some day to Sri Maharaj with a very open heart. I was nursing a bit of wounded feeling against him. When he had gone to Madras he told me that he would take me with him to Bengal on his return, but instead he sent me to Bangalore. Again, towards the end of 1919, when I went to Bhuvaneshwar, he did not allow me to stay with him for long and sent me to Bengal. For all these I had a complaining heart and was feeling unquiet within. I was seeking an opportunity for speaking out my mind to him, and one day it came. On

Sri Maharaj's auspicious birthday in 1921 Kālī Pūjā was performed. I planned that I would see him the next evening when others would go to the bank of the Gaṅgā for the immersion of the image. I did not, however, tell him about it. That evening I went to his room. Swami Visuddhananda was sitting near him. Peta Puri was also there. As soon as Sri Maharaj saw me, he, like a child, exclaimed to Peta Puri: 'Look, what a *yogī* I am !' I learnt that a little while ago he had asked Peta Puri to see if I had come; he knew that I would.

That day we had a lot of talk. Sri Maharaj said that he knew that I had a desire to move and visit places when I went to Bhuvaneshwar and, therefore, sent me to Bengal. He also knew that this tendency in me would soon disappear. In order, therefore, to get this done earlier, he had sent me away hurriedly. I felt ashamed when I found how deep was his concern in all that he did for me. He removed all my mental depressions and made my mind clean. As a result of it a new bond of inner relationship was created between him and myself. Shortly after this Sri Maharaj went away to Belur, leaving behind within my mind his divine image firmly established. The spiritual fervour he instilled in me and the ideas of piety and service he showed me while at Madras and Vārāṇasī still continue to inspire me. He is even now, through his grace, bringing to me in a subtle way new light and fresh inspiration. As days are passing, I am understanding the significance of Sri Ramakrishna's words that it is God Himself who comes in the form of a *guru*.

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PART I

THE SPIRITUAL IDEAL

CHAPTER 1

THE SPIRITUAL QUEST

Spiritual conversion

The young prince Siddhārtha was sitting alone under a tree in his palace-garden absorbed in his thoughts. It was midnight and the whole world lay hushed in darkness and silence. He had just then left the banquet hall having got disgusted with the noise and mirth of dancing girls. An intense dissatisfaction, a deep void, was growing within him. All of a sudden, there arose strange voices. As he listened, he heard some celestial beings singing in chorus:

> We moan for rest, alas! but rest can never find;
> We know not whence we come, nor where we float away.
> Time and again we tread this round of smiles and tears;
> In vain we pine to know whither our pathway leads,
> And why we play this empty play
>
> Rise, dreamer, from your dream, and slumber not again![1]

Siddhārtha rose from his seat, had a last look at his sleeping wife and child, and set out on his historic journey that ultimately made him Buddha, the Enlightened One.

Buddha was not alone in taking to the spiritual path. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad says:* 'Arise! Awake! And realize the Truth following the great teachers.'[2] Indeed, from time immemorial God has been speaking to man through the great scriptures to take up the cross and follow Him. And, in obedience to this call thousands of people in the East and in the West have given up their all and taken to this journey into the superconscious realms. For ordinary people this world and its pleasures are of great importance, but there are people who hunger and thirst after the Eternal and the Infinite. Think of Swami Vivekananda's struggles and relentless search for Truth. He was extraordinarily pure, strong, handsome, intelligent and talented, and could have risen to any height in worldly life if he had only cared to. The poverty and helplessness of his family was another compelling force to drag him into the worldly life. But, in spite of all these temptations, he chose the path of renunciation and service.

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[1] An adaptation by Girish Chandra Ghosh of the famous lines in the *Light of Asia* by Edwin Arnold. Quoted in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishana,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math), 1974, pp. 859-60

[2] उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान् निबोधत।
Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.3.14

One day or other, in the life of every man must come a time when he too feels the call of the spiritual ideal. When such a call comes he cannot but listen to it. Nothing in the world can then give him satisfaction. He can never find peace until he follows the dictates of that higher call. This inner awareness and compelling urge to follow the higher ideal marks the beginning of spiritual life. The spiritual ideal then fascinates him and haunts him all through life. This change from following worldly ideals to following a spiritual ideal is called 'conversion'. Spiritual life begins with that. In the case of some people this conversion is sudden; in the case of some others, it is a gradual development.

The number of people who undergo such genuine conversion is rather small at any time in any country. Whether you like it or not, true spiritual life is only for a chosen few. There can never be any mass spirituality, however beautiful this ideal may seem to you. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* says that out of thousands of people only a few take to spiritual life, and out of the latter, fewer still really attain the highest superconscious realization.[3] But let us all think we are these chosen few, and strive to make ourselves fit for the fulfilment of the highest spiritual ideal.

Spiritual aspiration is a rare blessing

In the field of religion also there is a kind of aristocracy. The great saints and sages, the illumined souls in all religions, form a class by themselves. But unlike worldly aristocrats, these spiritual aristocrats are always willing to share their riches with others. They are only too glad to give to others what they themselves enjoy. But the pity is few people care for the great treasures of spiritual life. Most of the people would rather wallow in the pigsty of the world than enjoy the cosy warmth of the spiritual mansion. You can take a horse to the water, but you cannot make it drink if it does not want to. So you need not look around to see how many people are following the spiritual path. If you feel the call of the higher ideal, you should follow it and try to fulfil its conditions. If others don't pay any heed to that call, you cannot do much about them. A parting of ways is inevitable in spiritual life.

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[3] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 7.3

Śaṁkarācārya says: 'A human birth, desire for emancipation, and contact with holy men–these three are very rare and are attained only through the grace of the Lord.'[4] But even these three advantages are not enough. We must be eager to profit by these and must be willing to sacrifice everything for spiritual life. There must be the readiness to undergo any hardship, pay any price, to achieve the supreme goal of life.

We should look upon it as a great fortune that, for some reason or other, our mind possesses an attraction for the higher and eternal things, and should see that we steadily and gradually proceed along the higher path, never flagging till we reach the goal. Our spiritual fervour is to be maintained, but we very often run the risk of becoming slack. Thus spiritual striving stops in most people after they have taken to the spiritual life for a certain time. Their minds are too restless and too outgoing to keep up this spiritual fervour and intensity for a very long time, and to go on steadily and doggedly with their spiritual practice and readings and studies. So we should be on our guard. Dogged tenacity is the one thing needed for spiritual life. All progress can only be had through great steadiness and tenacity, never allowing ourselves to flag or to become lukewarm. Wordsworth says in one of his famous poems, 'Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting.'[5] In another ode, he says, 'The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.'[6] We should not spend all our time in this state.

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[4] दुर्लभं त्रयमेवैतद्देवानुग्रहहेतुकम् ।
मनुष्यत्वं मुमुक्षुत्वं महापुरुषसंश्रयः ।।
Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, Verse 3

[5] William Wordsworth, *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*

No lasting satisfaction in the world

Very often when we get a thing, we find that we never really wanted it. We may have been seeking it, but when we get it we may actually find that the desire has vanished, and some other desire has taken its place. Many people mistake the true nature of their yearnings and give them worldly direction, whereas in reality no human yearning can ever find satisfaction in anything that is not permanent and unchanging, however much people may try to deceive themselves on this point. The old void haunts them again and again and mostly in a more terrible and relentless form than before. People seek happiness outside in external objects, in the physical aspects of men and women. But true happiness lies within ourselves; it is our inalienable heritage. External things can never bring true happiness to us, and what little we get disappears in no time. We commit the mistake of looking at a certain span of time instead of looking at the whole of our lifetime. Temporary happiness there is, no doubt, in worldly relations, in human love and human affections. But temporary happiness can never mean real happiness, rather it is the opposite of it. True happiness is the intrinsic nature of the inner Self. Let us have the desire to know our nature, to know our true Self. In Self-realization alone lies real blessedness.

Even though the higher Self of man is a part of the Divine and is actually inseparable from it, still the devotee gives more importance to God than to his own soul. To him God alone is the repository of all peace and blessedness. We should try to look within and find Him seated within our own hearts. This body of ours is the living temple of God. This is a conception we find stressed again and again in all the scriptures. The best temples of the Divine are, however, the great prophets and seers. That is why they exert the greatest influence. Those who have realized the Truth in their own souls alone can teach others the way to realization. The Lord is always at the back of our minds, at the back of our personality, and only if we can pray with a fervent heart will the prayer be heard, otherwise not. We should never think in terms of worldly happiness while praying. Happiness, as it is ordinarily understood, is no real index of spiritual life, no proof whatever of spiritual progress or realization. Spiritual happiness is of a different kind, it is the 'peace of God which passeth all understanding.'[7]

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[6] William Wordsworth, *The World is Too Much with Us*

We should not ask God for the things of the world. Suppose He grants them. The material things may bring troubles too. When we approach this great boon-giver we should never ask Him for worldly things connected with personal wishes and desires. We may approach the Lord just for saving our souls from getting drowned in the ocean of worldliness and infatuation for material things. Ordinarily, if we feel unhappy, we would rather adjust ourselves to our unhappiness and cling to our desires and fancies than change our ways and come to Truth and Bliss. We are so body-bound that we stress physical enjoyment more than anything else and are not prepared to renounce it. Rather we go on clinging desperately to its different forms although we get nothing but kicks and blows again and again. Such is the tremendous power of Māyā or ignorance.

The Great Father or the Great Mother is witnessing the children at play. It is only when the child gets tired of its toys and childish occupations that the Lord really comes to it and draws it away from the play-land of illusion. Children play with sweets, with dolls, with toy-soldiers, with toy-houses, with toy-cars, and nothing can be done by the Lord until they get tired of these and turn away from them in utter disgust. God takes it as great fun. And then, one day, the child has become a little grown-up and cries, 'What have I done with my life?', and the Lord says, 'Yes, what have you done, my child? Who asked you to do it? Who asked you to go on playing indefinitely in such a foolish way? Who asked you to get hurt and get entangled with your toys? Who did it all?' And then very often it is already too late, and the child sits in the ruins of its shattered life and wails.

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[7] *Bible,* Philippians, 4:7

Strive for the Highest

We all have an opportunity to follow saner and better ways, but we cling to our particular toys and do not let go our hold. So we have to suffer, and we suffer until we learn the great lesson life teaches us again and again, in innumerable ways, and come to act wisely. Just as most people try to achieve their worldly ambitions and ideals, we should strive for spiritual life and illumination, but this most people won't do. And it depends solely on our own choice whether we take up the worldly life or the spiritual life, whether we lead a life of slavery and fear or that of freedom and fearlessness.

We must strive to achieve something that is higher, that is not subject to change and decay. But we very often choose the path of *avidyā* (ignorance) wilfully and deliberately because we cling to our phantoms of physical and emotional enjoyment which, after all, we shall have to give up sooner or later. We all, one day, must let go the hold, and if we do not do this of our own free will, the toy will be torn away from us, and this will mean great sorrow, and in many cases, a broken heart. For most people this is the only way in which they can be made to learn their lessons, but it is very painful and usually takes many lives. We should try to live a spiritual life, knowingly, consciously, deliberately, in a spirit of dedication and singleness of purpose. This will of ours may be directed towards the higher channels of life or towards the lower ones just as we please.

If we are able to rouse tremendous enthusiasm in ourselves for the goal to be attained, then only shall we get the necessary energy to strive for it and do our utmost. In the world of the spirit you very often find people with a chaotic brain. They do not care to follow any definite system, and like to drift on the boundless sea of their emotions and impulses. So they attain practically nothing, in fact, just as little as the out-and-out worldly-minded people do. No person with a muddled brain can have any success in the world, and much less so in the spiritual world. Settle once for all what you really want. Very often we want to attain peace, but follow a path that can only end in restlessness and trouble. There is a saying in Bengal: 'There are some people who, when they want to go towards the east, start walking towards the west; and if you ask them why they do so, they reply, "Because I want to go towards the north." '

The test of Truth

The lover, when dreaming of his beloved, imagines things that have no reality. The mad man too imagines things that do not exist at all. All hallucinations are to be avoided in spiritual life. We must try to get a glimpse of Truth by following a systematic course of spiritual practice. If such a glimpse comes unawares, and if we are not properly prepared for it through long and regular training, the reaction may be tremendous and may even unsettle us for life. We must first learn how to become fit for such glimpses so that we can then make them our own for good. Spiritual evolution at first brings great suffering to the aspirant, not happiness. In the intermediate stages his life becomes very difficult. Then he has no longer any real interest in what he has in the world, and cannot yet obtain self-realization which is still beyond his reach. It is just like hanging in mid-air without being able to go either up or down.

The test of Truth is this: whereas in the case of worldly things and worldly relations you can never get any ultimate satisfaction, in the case of spirituality and spiritual life you can get that perfect satisfaction which is not dependent upon anything external. So the great sage Nārada says, 'Realizing that (divine Love), a man attains perfection, immortality and ultimate fulfilment.'[8]

The really thirsty man always needs water, but those who are not thirsty can do without it for a long time. The really sincere aspirant will do all he is told, but people are so half-hearted and so little sincere that they are in no great hurry to follow the advice they are given.

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[8] यल्लब्ध्वा पुमान् सिद्धो भवति, अमृतो भवति, तृप्तो भवति ।
Nārada Bhakti-Sūtras 1.4

And then, we want the purest water, not adulterated water, or water that has become terribly dirty. We should rather feel really thirsty but should not go in for anything that is not good and pure.

Truth cannot be realized without struggle. All life is no doubt a struggle. Everybody is struggling to achieve something or other. But spiritual struggle is a struggle of a higher order. It is a struggle for consciousness. Struggle, struggle, struggle! There is no other way. Let us not be afraid of struggles.

The power of reality

It is often very difficult to have yearning for God in the beginning, and the reason is that God does not seem a reality to us. With most of us this body is our soul, and it is for the enjoyment of this body on the material plane–it need not necessarily be a very gross form of enjoyment–that we are most anxious. Religion to most of us is something highly amateurish and a kind of fashion, just like so many other fashions. But if some day, through our spiritual striving, God comes to be a reality, we feel that our whole being responds to that reality and longs for it alone. If the world is real to us, it absorbs our entire attention. If something else is real, that too does the same. That which we take to be real for the time being affects us, stirs up our feelings, draws out our will; it occupies our whole intellect. In fact, our whole being responds to this reality.

If we carefully study our own lives and the lives of saints, we find a great difference. It is the 'reality' that affects the minds of both, but the reality is something different to the saint from what it is to us ordinary people. To us this world is real; to them the spiritual world alone is real. Their whole life is filled with this one idea: how to realize the Divine, how to make Him a reality instead of an intellectual and vague concept. If we are able to appreciate what the saints call 'reality', we can also appreciate why they are ever ready even to lay down their lives for the sake of God-realization.

We should not, however, blindly imitate the saints. They may appear rather unconventional or strange in their behaviour. But, as we have said, all their thirst for God is based on a clear conception of reality. Those of us for whom this sense-bound world alone is real, should be careful in our spiritual struggles. For us success largely depends on the regularity and intensity of our daily spiritual practice. Very often we are so careless in this. Without steady practice nothing can be attained in spiritual life. Spiritual life must be a life of dedication to the Highest, a life of consecration and sacrifice and one-pointedness. So, we should be more wide-awake and more careful about our own thoughts for our own benefit and for the benefit of others to whom our thoughts of lust, greed or violence are worse than poison-gas. Indeed, the havoc we create by our impure thoughts is far worse than that created by poison-gas. By our impure thoughts we affect people who do not even know impurity. But by our pure thoughts we help others in their struggle after purity.

Divine discontent

We must rouse a tremendous divine discontent, the discontent the mystics of all ages speak of. Unless we are able to rouse in the soul this divine discontent which can destroy all our attachments to worldly things and desires, we will not be able to get real yearning for spiritual realization. There can never be any real peace in the world, though we must play our part in it as best we can. There must never be any kind of slackness in our striving nor any kind of satisfaction with our state of bondage. Such forms of satisfaction are very dangerous for all spiritual aspirants. We must consciously keep burning the fire of hankering and yearning for the higher life. We must never waste our energies for anything lower. We must never prefer the peace of lethargy to this restlessness for spiritual achievement.

There can be no security unless we have already proceeded very far towards the ultimate goal. Any devotee may come to grief or have a nasty fall at any moment before he has attained to self-realization. So we should never risk too much relying on our own strength before having advanced considerably.

Spiritual practice and prayer must be intensified. Constant prayer, day and night, constant meditation, constant thinking of higher thoughts would do us immense good. The mind of the beginner must be kept constantly busy with divine ideas so as to create the habit. After having created the right habit the path becomes smoother, and there is less strain in the life of the spiritual aspirant.

We must give our whole mind to God, not merely a bit of it. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'If I want to buy a piece of cloth worth one rupee, I will have to pay one rupee and not one paisa less. Otherwise I shall not get it.' So also in spiritual life, if you don't pay full attention, you simply don't get anything. If after practising meditation perfunctorily for a few months or even years, you find that you have got nothing spiritually, you have nobody else to blame.

What we need is perseverance. There must be steady, regular practice. Let us rather die in the struggle to keep our body and mind pure than give it up. What does it matter even if we die? What matters is that we realize the Truth, that we attain our full stature, our true being. If we struggle our utmost, if we do our utmost, we will have fulfilled our duty. Then the rest must be left to the Divine. Here true self-surrender and resignation to the Lord have their place.

'The man who has intelligence for his charioteer and the well-controlled mind for reins, attains the end of the journey, that supreme abode of the Divine'[9], says the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. We should never be contented or satisfied with ourselves and think we have done our best. It may have been our best for the time being, but we should pray to the Divine for greater and greater strength to be able to do more. Today I may be able to lift only ten pounds, but I can ask for the strength to lift a hundred pounds. My capacity can be increased, even if I think I have already done my best and

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[9] विज्ञानसारथिर्यस्तु मनःप्रग्रहवान् नरः ।
सोऽध्वनः पारमाप्नोति तद्विष्णोः परमं पदम् ।।
Kaṭha Upaniṣad, 1.3.9

I am doing my best, because this 'best' is not a fixed quantity.

Example of saints

We must cultivate intense yearning for God — the unceasing, uncompromising quest for God that we find in the lives of saints and sages. Śrī Caitanya was a great scholar in his younger days. But at the prime of his youth he underwent a sudden conversion and became an ardent lover of God. His love for God was so intense that he could not forget Him even for a second. His whole life was spent in spiritual inebriation. His ecstatic devotion finds its expression in a small poem he wrote in which he says:

> Ah, how I long for the day
> When, in chanting Thy Name, the tears will spill down
> From my eyes, and my throat will refuse to utter
> Its prayers, choking and stammering with ecstasy.
> When all the hairs of my body will stand erect with joy!
> Ah, how I long for the day
> When an instant's separation from Thee, O Govinda,
> Will be as a thousand years,
> When my heart burns away with its desire,
> And the world, without Thee, is a heartless void.
> Prostrate at Thy feet let me be, in unwavering devotion
> Neither imploring the embrace of Thine arms
> Nor bewailing the withdrawal of Thy Presence
> Though it tears my soul asunder.
> O Thou, who stealest the hearts of Thy devotees,
> Do with me what Thou wilt —
> For Thou art my heart's Beloved, Thou and Thou alone.[10]

Prahlāda was an example of the saints praised in the Purāṇas. Even from childhood he had intense devotion for Lord Viṣṇu. His demoniacal father tried all in his power to turn the boy to the worldly path. But the young boy braved all the cruel ordeals and went on with his ecstatic praising of the Lord. When the Lord appeared before the boy and asked him what he wanted, he said:

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[10] Srī Caitanya, 'Śikṣāṣṭakam', trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood in *Vedanta for the Western World* (Hollywood: Marcel Rodd Co.), 1943, p. 225

> May I think of Thee with that strong love which the ignorant cherish for the things of the world, and may that love never cease to abide in my heart.[11]
>
> My Lord, should thousands of births fall to my lot, may I still always possess an unshakable and unflinching devotion to Thee.[12]

In modern times Sri Ramakrishna stands as an unparalleled example for intensity of yearning for God. His longing for the vision of God in all His aspects was so great that he didn't sleep for six years. He spent his time day and night in various spiritual moods which were so intense that people thought that he had become mad. His was indeed divine madness. In the book *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* which contains his authentic teachings and conversations, we find the idea of yearning for God stressed very much. Indeed we may say that it was the chief discipline that Sri Ramakrishna prescribed for all aspirants. The following passage is a typical example.

> The Master (to Bankim and others): One must have for God the yearning of a child. The child sees nothing but confusion when his mother is away. You may try to cajole him by putting a sweetmeat in his hand; but he will not be fooled. He only says, 'No, I want to go to my mother.' One must feel such yearning for God. Ah, what yearning! How restless a child feels for his mother! Nothing can make him forget his mother. He to whom the enjoyment of worldly happiness appears tasteless, he who takes no delight in anything of the world–money, name, creature comforts, sense pleasure–becomes sincerely grief-stricken for the vision of the Mother. And to him alone the Mother comes running, leaving all Her other duties.
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> Ah, that restlessness is the whole thing. Whatever path you follow, whether you are a Hindu, a Mussalman, a Christian, a

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[11] See Swami Yatiswarananda, *Universal Prayers* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math), 1971, Verse No. 212

[12] *ibid.*, Verse No. 211

> Śākta, a Vaiṣṇava, or a Brāhmo–the vital point is restlessness. God is our inner Guide. It doesn't matter if you take a wrong path–only you must be restless for Him. He Himself will put you on the right path.
>
> Besides, there are errors in all paths. Everyone thinks his watch is right; but as a matter of fact, no watch is absolutely right. But that doesn't hamper one's work. If a man is restless for God he gains the company of *sādhus* and as far as possible corrects his own watch with the *sādhus'* help.....
>
> Bankim (to the Master): 'Sir how can one develop divine Love?'
>
> Master: Through restlessness–the restlessness a child feels for his mother. The child feels bewildered when he is separated from his mother, and weeps longingly for her. If a man can weep like that for God he can even see Him.
>
> At the approach of dawn the eastern horizon becomes red. Then one knows it will soon be sunrise. Likewise, if you see a person restless for God, you can be pretty certain that he hasn't long to wait for His vision.[13]

All the intimate disciples of Sri Ramakrishna had this burning passion for God. Balaram was one among them. His first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna is very revealing:

> The day following his arrival in Calcutta, he started for Dakshineswar. There was a great crowd in the temple-garden owing to the presence of Keshab Chandra Sen and his Brāhmo followers. Balaram sat in a corner of the Master's room, and when the party went to eat, Sri Ramakrishna called to him and enquired if he had anything to ask. 'Sir,' said Balaram, 'does God really exist?' 'Certainly', replied the Master. 'Can anybody realize Him?' 'Yes,' said the Master, 'He reveals Himself to the devotee who thinks of Him as his nearest and dearest. Because you do not get any response by praying to him once, you must not conclude that he does not exist. 'But,' again interrogated Balaram, 'why can't I see Him when I pray to Him so much?' Sri Ramakrishna asked with a smile: 'Do you really consider Him as dear to your heart as your own children?' 'No, Sir,' said

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[13] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit. p. 644

> Balaram after a moment's pause, 'I never felt for Him so strongly.' The Master said in an animated voice, 'Pray to God thinking Him as dearer than your own self. Verily, I tell you, He is most attached to His devotees. He cannot but reveal Himself to them. He comes to man before He is sought. There is none more intimate and affectionate than God.' Balaram got new light from these words. 'Every word of what he says,' he thought within himself, 'is true. Nobody ever spoke to me so forcibly of God.'[14]

Begin early in life

There are a good many people who think that they can leave religion to their old age after enjoying all the fruits of life. But their time may never come because, after dissipating the greater part of their energy in physical enjoyment, there will not be much of it left for strenuous spiritual practice. Many people start spiritual life too late to get any great benefit from it. Many people realize too late that their life had been in vain. But they are better than the old fool who still runs after physical enjoyment even in old age, vainly imagining that he is a romantic young man. In the West you meet so many of these miserable people.

One has to begin as early as possible with one's spiritual life. Unless we have sown the seed of spirituality in our soul early in life, there is no possibility of creating the spiritual attitude in later life. Sri Ramakrishna one day warned his beloved young disciple Narendra about associating himself with Girish, the famous actor-dramatist of Bengal:

> Master: Do you visit Girish frequently? No matter how much one washes a cup that has contained a solution of garlic, still a trace of the smell will certainly linger. The youngsters who come here are pure souls untouched by 'woman' and 'gold'. Men who have associated a long time with 'woman' and 'gold' smell of the garlic, as it were. They are like a mango pecked by crows. Such a fruit cannot be offered to the Deity in the temple, and you would hesitate to eat it yourself. Again, take the case of a new pot and another in which curd has been made. One is afraid

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[14] *Life of Sri Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama), 1964, p. 371

to keep milk in the second pot, for the milk very often turns sour.[15]

Girish later on heard about this talk and asked Sri Ramakrishna whether 'the smell of garlic' would go. The Master replied that the smell would go if the cup was heated in a blazing fire. Once a person has become a slave of his instincts, he finds it too difficult to free himself from their clutches. Old age is too short to achieve this freedom from instincts. If your ideal is freedom from bondage and sorrow by the attainment of superconscious experience, you had better start now.

And suppose one dies before attaining one's goal? Remember the passage in the *Gītā*: 'Even a little of this discipline saves one from the great fear.'[16] Those who have seriously struggled in spiritual life, those who have surrendered their all to the Divine, need not have any fear. There are other planes of existence where they can continue their spiritual quest, if they have lived an intensely spiritual life while alive. Then one would follow the same course where one left off. Death brings about only a change of environment but the focus of our consciousness, viz. the Divine, is always with us. Wherever we are, the Infinite is always with us. When we get this idea we lose all fear of death. We should court neither life nor death. Let destiny run its course but let us fix our heart for ever on the Divine. Let us march on fearlessly, resolutely, towards the goal.

Until you fall asleep, until you die, always busy yourself with Vedāntic thoughts.[17]

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[15] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit. p. 683

[16] स्वल्पमप्यस्य धर्मस्य त्रायते महतो भयात् ।
Bhagavad - Gītā 2.40

[17] आसुप्तेः आमृतेः कालं नयेद्वेदान्तचिन्तया ।।
Quoted in *Siddhānta Leśa Saṁgraha* of Appaiah Dīkṣita, Chapter 1, Parisaṁkhyā Vidhi Vicāra.

CHAPTER 2

THE IDEAL OF SUPERCONSCIOUS EXPERIENCE

Why do we need spiritual experience?

When we look deeply within, we are surprised to find that we are greatly dissatisfied with ourselves, with the world we live in, and the persons we associate with. This dissatisfaction creates conflict and tension which seem to be increasing in our contemporary world. Abnormal conflicts and tensions make the mind and the body ill. Whatever its cause, dissatisfaction with the pattern of one's outer life produces conflict and consequent illness of mind and body. Our lives are then seen to be useless and without a goal. Moreover, when we feel dissatisfied with ourselves we tend to create restlessness instead of peace in others. As is the case with physical illness, mental illness can also be infectious.

We may have got the right work but perhaps we are bringing the wrong spirit to bear upon it. In that case we should develop a new attitude towards the job. Or perhaps we are doing something that fails to use our particular talents. Then we feel frustrated, and frustration causes strange and often harmful behaviour. Perhaps we lean too much on others. Or we may imagine hostility around us and waste our energies fighting imaginary enemies. Or perhaps we isolate ourselves from others, build up an idealized image of ourselves, and live in a fool's paradise. The worst symptom of mental illness comes when we begin to hate ourselves; and then life becomes doubly miserable.

What is the remedy? What can we do about all this? The wise psychologist tells us that before we can find an ideal for which to live effectively, we must have a deep understanding of our own nature. By changing our opinion of ourselves we can change ourselves; and this new attitude necessarily precedes the finding of a proper outlet for our energies. How to change our opinion about ourselves? The psychologist says that this can be done through psychoanalysis. We must allow ourselves to be examined by a psychologist. He tries to sound the depths of our personality through intelligent questions, unearths our hidden complexes, and tells what actually is wrong with us. Theoretically, this method appears to be all right, and many people have really got some benefit from psychoanalysis. But its limitation lies in the fact that the psychologist's knowledge of others depends on his own knowledge of himself which is usually shallow.

Western psychologists with all their research have not succeeded in understanding man in depth. They have no doubt discovered that the conscious mind of man is under the control of a vast unconscious mind, and that the conscious and the unconscious minds are often incompatible in their movements. The conscious mind may have higher aspirations but the unconscious mind may be full of baser passions. Unconscious motivations work against conscious actions and thinking. But what western psychology has failed to achieve is to discover a satisfactory means of integrating the unconscious and the conscious minds of man. What most psychologists ask their patients to do is to yield to the demands of the unconscious. In some cases this may release the inner tensions. But this may not be permanent and may even be more harmful.

It is here that Hindu Yoga steps in. Yoga begins with purifying the unconscious first and making it compatible with the conscious. This purification is not something artificial. Purity is our real nature. It is the true nature of the Self of man. Hinduism long ago discovered a higher dimension to the personality of man, viz. the superconscious. It is the superconscious that gives us knowledge about our true higher Self. It reflects the light of the Self. This light must be brought to bear on the dark unconscious chambers of the mind. Then the unconscious is purified. It cooperates with the conscious mind and its aspirations. Inner division, conflicts and tensions then vanish. So the discovery of the superconscious is the most important point in the attainment of inner peace and harmony. The discovery of the superconscious is the first spiritual experience. It is that which integrates the unconscious with the conscious. We regain our whole personality, our whole self.

Spiritual experience not only brings us the knowledge of the superconscious, but also solves the problems of the unconscious mind. Some of our problems are due to complexes hidden in the unconscious. Sex may be the cause of conflicts in many people, especially, early in their youth. But it is certainly wrong to exaggerate its role in man's life out of all proportion, as Freud did. The aggressive tendency in man to dominate others may be the cause of conflicts in some pople. But it is certainly wrong to exaggerate its role and make it responsible for all the ills of man, as Dr. Adler has done in his school of psychology. In the course of my long stay in the so-called materialistic West I came across a number of people who were spiritually hungry. Their problems were mostly of a spiritual nature. Many of them were dissatisfied with the joys of ordinary life and even with the conventional ways of institutional religion. They were seeking a higher experience, a higher existence.

The psychologist Dr. Carl Jung was one of the earliest to understand the spiritual need of man. He has pointed out that modern man is in search of his soul. But it is clear from his writings that Dr. Jung himself does not seem to have found out his true self. I met him in Switzerland and presented him some of my books. He spoke to me about the unconscious. He said that the superconscious of the Hindus was included in the unconscious. That is a strange doctrine. It is actually just the other way round. We generally think that the body is the outermost, mind is inner to it, and the soul is the innermost layer. We have to reverse the order. The Atman or Self is the infinite, all-pervading Consciousness. The mind is contained within It. Still inner is the physical body which is limited and is the least pervasive.

The superconscious is at present unknown to us, but that does not mean that it is the same as the unconscious mind of the psychologists. It can be attained through spiritual disciplines. It is the source of supreme peace and bliss. More than all, it gives man the feeling of wholeness, the feeling of supreme fulfilment.

Dr. Jung is famous for his classification of human types into extroverts and introverts. The introvert is given to brooding and self-criticism, lives largely in a subjective world within his own mind. The extrovert is outgoing, busies himself with the outside world of affairs; his reality is the objective world of action. These types are not mutually exclusive. We can find them both in ourselves. In Vedānta we speak of the *karmayogī* (the work-oriented man), the *bhakta* (the devotional man) and the *jñānī* (the intellectual man). But these types are not like watertight compartments. In every one of us some elements of all these types are present. We must try to bring about proper harmony between the different tendencies. Through training we can combine and integrate the various tendencies within our nature and finally even transcend them all. Thus we can work with enthusiasm, have intense devotion to a higher ideal, and also be rational in our thinking and work. But for this there must be intense spiritual aspiration as the uniting force.

In a book called *Release from Nervous Tension* the author, Dr. Fink, gives a positive suggestion for the practice of relaxation. First, he says, learn to relax head and neck, then knees and legs, chest, arms, eyelids, and so on throughout the body.[1] Such piecemeal release of tension, if properly practised, has certainly a beneficial effect, but our teachers tell us that through self-analysis and meditation we can learn to get control of our entire personality. This is a far more effective and lasting means of removing tension than the effort to relax our members one at a time.

Why should we liberate ourselves painfully limb by limb, when by proper training we can take hold of the mind and attain spiritual experience that will release us all at once? I am reminded of the story of a miser. He was on the death-bed and the priest came to 'save' him. Being greedy, the priest decided to save him limb by limb and charge a certain fee for every part saved. When he finally came to the right leg, the priest thought: 'Now I am going to charge him a lot as he is escaping us.'

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[1] David Harold Fink, *Release from Nervous Tension* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1943), pp. 67-72

So he said aloud to the miser: 'Now, I am going to ask a large sum for your right leg.' The dying man, who had a very calculating mind, summoned all his strength and said: 'But, father, that is a wooden leg.' Whatever theologians may say about saving a man limb by limb, real spiritual teachers have a more effective means of salvation. This is the ideal of liberation of the self through direct perception of the higher Self. Spiritual experience transforms the whole personality. Intense peace and bliss fill the soul and bring about complete relaxation of mind and body.

Perception – direct and indirect

The correct Sanskrit word for religion is *darśana*. This word *darśana* has a twofold meaning. It means seeing or realization. It also means the path or discipline leading to this realization. By religion we mean both. The word *darśana* is also used to mean philosophy. In Hinduism we have six systems of philosophy, and all these are called *darśanas*.

In Hinduism religion and philosophy have been inseparable and even synonymous. The common aim of both being the intuitive vision of Truth, they fulfil each other. As Prof. Max Müller has very truly observed, the two have worked together harmoniously in India alone where religion derives its breadth of vision from philosophy, and philosophy, its spirituality from religion. Religion is the practical form of philosophy, and philosophy the rational form of religion. The Hindu philosophers were primarily men of spiritual realization. And therefore their systems, based as they are on transcendental experience, lead to the same goal, if followed with sincerity and devotion.

Life is a constant interaction between personality and environment. Personality has different levels, so also has environment. The physical body is in touch with the physical world. The mental body is in touch with the mental world. The spiritual body or soul is in touch with the Universal Spirit or God. The personality can get experience at all these various levels. At whatever level we remain, we take the experiences of that particular level to be true. In our waking state we see many things which engage our attention completely. In our dreams also we perceive many things which are real to us as long as we dream. All this is perception, *darśana,* but not necessarily true. So the problem is to distinguish right perception from the false one. In Indian philosophy there is a great deal of discussion about the criterion of valid perception. The scientist wants to know the truth of physical objects. He too has his experimental verification of the facts he perceives. The psychologist has his *darśana* too. He discovers with the help of his insight the laws of thought. The spiritual aspirant wants to have direct experience of God or ultimate Reality. This is what is called *aparokṣānubhūti* (immediate experience).

We think too much of our sense perceptions. We think we are perceiving the outside things directly. Never. The stimulus comes from outside objects to the eye. From there the message is carried to the mind, and then to the Self which is the knower. What an indirect process! And we are accustomed to calling it direct perception. Real direct perception or *aparokṣānubhūti* is that in which Truth is directly revealed by the light of the Self or Atman. This inner Light shines through the mind and the senses. It can also shine by itself. This is superconsciousness. It is sometimes called *turīya.* Our experience generally covers three states of consciousness: *jāgrat* or waking, *svapna* or dreaming, and *suṣupti* or deep sleep. As distinct from these three, there is a fourth state, the *turīya.* It is not exactly a 'state' like the other three. It is a form of transcendental consciousness of which the other three states are partial manifestations. In that state the soul realizes that it is a part of the Infinite Spirit.

Inadequacy of book knowledge

No spiritual practice is to be attempted by reading about it from books. We may, of course, read books by way of information, but we should know which ideas to take up and which ones to leave to themselves. We may read about various kinds of spiritual practice, but we should not try to follow them without first knowing which ones are good for us. We may know of many approaches, and this may expand our mental outlook.

But we should know which is the right approach for us. During the early stages in our spiritual life, which is usually a period of experiments, we should proceed slowly, noticing the physical and mental changes that take place in us and adjusting ourselves accordingly.

The right method followed by a wrong person brings about bad results. Hence the aspirant is expected to be properly qualified. But in modern times anyone may get any book, read about some practice, follow it, and also come to grief. Instructions always differ with individuals. One man's meat may be another man's poison. Each one must follow the law of his being, and adjust himself securely to his mental and physical environment. If the superstructure is built on the right foundation, it stands all right. Otherwise, it tumbles down.

Generally it is not the Truth that we love, but we just love ourselves in something. We are in love with an idea because it is our idea, not because it represents the Truth. And little knowledge is always most dangerous.

'God is known to him who really knows Him to be unknown. And He is unknown to him who thinks He is known'.[2]

To a true and steady devotee the Lord reveals His glory. And the devotee's task is to be in tune with the Divine, with the Infinite. And then the Lord manifests His glory to him. Just as man tries to approach God, God is ever ready to approach man.

An intellectual enquiry into the mysteries of nature made by scientists and philosophers cannot reveal the Truth. If you go on trying to find the root-cause of things with your intellect you will find it to be an impossible task. A finer and subtler instrument is needed to cut through the phenomena and realize the Truth. It is really very funny — all this phenomenal world including our body, thoughts and all; there is no sense, at least it so appears to us. What is the reason for the Formless assuming form? It all seems to be without rhyme or reason because it transcends reason. There is no explanation for this diversified and multiform play of Māyā, and none has ever been able to explain it in terms of the relative. On the relative plane there is absolutely no explanation, whether you call it God's will as the Christian does, or God's *līlā* or sport or play as the Híndu does. It can never be explained, but it can be transcended.

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[2] यस्यामतं तस्य मतं मतं यस्य न वेद सः ।
अविज्ञातं विजानतां विज्ञातमविजानताम् ॥
Kena Upaniṣad 2.3

The only ultimate proof of everything is direct perception. If there is a God at all, He must be seen, He must be felt. Mere theorizing will never do. We have to believe in the words of those who have seen Him, we have to follow in their footsteps, and then verify their experience in our own lives. Mere faith won't do, although it is necessary in the beginning. And as Swami Vivekananda observes in the introduction to his 'Rāja-yoga':

> If there has been one experience in this world in any particular branch of knowledge, it absolutely follows that that experience has been possible millions of times before, and will be repeated eternally. ... The teachers of the science of Yoga, therefore, declare that religion is not only based upon the experience of ancient times, but that no man can be religious until he has the same perceptions himself.[3]

This is the ideal of divine realization we must for ever hold on to.

States of superconscious realization

The joy that comes to us through sense pleasures brings in its train no end of misery. At first it may be like nectar, but later on it leads to frustration and disappointment.[4] Intellectual pleasures are, no doubt, higher than this but they do not give us the ultimate satisfaction or fulfilment. When we are in meditation, or when we sing the glory of the Lord, we feel an inner joy. This happiness is very good but it may not last long. But the joy that comes to the seeker in the transcendental state of consciousness abides with him for ever. It is the real happiness of which the other forms of happiness are but shadows. Even if that higher spiritual experience is not complete, even if one has only reached the threshold of superconsciousness, the memory of the joy once realized lingers, and forces the aspirant to struggle to reach the highest state and enjoy everlasting bliss.

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[3] Swami Vivekananda, 'Rāja-yoga', *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,* Vol. 1 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1970), p. 127

[4] *Bhagavad- Gītā,* 18.8

All religions have their origin in superconscious realization. The experience of the superconscious made Jesus, a carpenter's son, the Christ adored by millions of people. It made Mohammed, a poor camel driver, the Prophet of Islam. It made Nimāi Pandit, a great scholar fond of intellectual gymnastics, Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya, the messenger of divine Love. Coming to modern times, we find Gadadhar Chattopadhyaya, a poor temple priest in Calcutta, transformed by superconscious realization into Sri Ramakrishna, the prophet of harmony of all religions. Of course, these were not ordinary men.

Many of us have heard of God but do not really know what that term means. Through spiritual practice some may get glimpses of divinity. And there are others who are not satisfied with these fleeting glimpses. They dive deep into themselves and discover God as the Soul of all souls. Just as the soul exists in the body, so God exists in all souls–unattached but controlling all. God is both immanent and transcendent. The devotee assumes various relationships with the Divine, and enjoys supreme bliss of communion with Him. When we say that the devotee looks upon God as the Master, the Friend, the Mother, or the Beloved, it should not be understood in a gross sense. Religion is, as Swami Vivekananda says, 'the eternal relation between the eternal soul and the eternal God'.[5] This idea is conveyed in terms of human relationships.

But there are others who transcend even this state. They discover the unity of all existence in Brahman. The soul is lost in the supreme Spirit and there remains the One-without-a-second. Sri Ramakrishna illustrates this through a beautiful parable. Once a salt doll went to measure the depth of the ocean. In the process of measuring, it itself got dissolved and became one with the ocean out of which it had orginally come.[6]

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[5] *The Complete Works*, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 4

One who attains to direct superconscious experience is called a *ṛṣi* or seer. Everybody is a seer of a sort. One who perceives sense objects is a seer. One who perceives distant stars and planets is a seer. One who can know the thoughts of others is a seer. One who discovers the laws of thought and workings of human mind is also a seer. But, as distinct from these, the word *ṛṣi* is used in the case of one who has intuitively experienced the transcendental Truth. This power of intuition, called *divya cakṣu* or 'divine eye' in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* [7], is latent in all men.

Ignorance and its conquest

What prevents us from developing this 'divine eye' forthwith? Vedāntic teachers say it is ignorance. Patañjali also speaks about ignorance as that which clouds the vision of Puruṣa, the Self. In the *Yoga-Sūtras* we read: 'Ignorance is, taking the non-eternal, the impure, the painful, and the non-Self for the eternal, the pure, the happy, and the Ātman or Self, respectively.'[8] Under the intoxication of ignorance Truth becomes worse than fiction.

There is the story of a drunkard who was seen frantically climbing a lamp-post shouting all the while. The police naturally caught him and dragged him to the magistrate, who asked him, 'What is the matter with you?' The man replied: 'What could I do, Sir? I was pursued by three crocodiles. I had to save myself by climbing the lamp-post.' Crocodiles on the road of a city! And yet that was what he saw under the influence of drink. Under the influence of ignorance we too see many things which do not have ultimate reality.

How to overcome this ignorance and attain superconscious realization is the next question. Ignorance is not known as such. It manifests itself in various ways. First of all comes egotism. This eclipses the real Self or Ātman. Then comes desire or attachment. When these are checked or thwarted, they give rise to anger and fear. Man is bound to the world by ignorance, egotism and the instincts. Modern psychologists speak of complexes. According to one classification, there are three types of complexes: the sex-complex, the ego-complex, and the herd-complex. Spiritual life does not even begin unless one learns to go beyond the hold of these complexes. This is the meaning of spiritual struggle. It is not possible to overcome the hold of instincts in a day. We are our own obstacles; external obstacles are nothing compared to those we create within. Our whole personality must be overhauled. How to do this? Here the mystics of the world religions have discovered for us several paths.

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[6] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 29

[7] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 11.8

[8] Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra,* 2.5 (The translation is Swami Vivekananda's)

The path of mystics

A mystic is one who has the direct intuitive experience of the ultimate Reality, whether It is called God or the Self. In Sanskrit we call him a *ṛṣi*. Every great religion in the world has produced numerous mystics. But all religions have not recognized their greatness. That is because in some of the religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, the main emphasis is on faith and morality as the means for salvation. The followers of these religions are expected to have absolute faith in the prophets who founded their religions. Each religion claims the superiority of its own founding prophet, and all those who do not accept this will be denied salvation, which means they have to go to hell. In spite of such ideas these religions have produced outstanding saints who had direct experience of God. Mysticism has never been recognized as a valid and necessary part of Christianity and Islam. Many Christian mystics had to face persecution by the Church. In the seventeenth century the so called quietist movement was put down with an iron hand. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries anti-mystical movements within and without the Church were so strong that Christianity had all but forgotten its great mystical traditions by the beginning of the present century. The mystic movement in Islam is called Sufism. In spite of the resistance of the orthodox and the violence of fanatics, which caused the death or persecution of a number of earnest seekers of God, Islam too has produced an astonishingly large number of mystics, some of whom attained to the pinnacles of spiritual experience.

It is only when we come to India, and especially Hinduism, that we find religious freedom and mystical luxuriance. According to Hinduism direct intuitive experience of the supreme Spirit is essential for one's salvation. Salvation in Hinduism means total freedom from sorrow and ignorance. As long as a man has not attained this highest freedom called *mukti* or 'liberation', he has to be born again and again, and experience the bitter-sweet fruits of life. It is in Hinduism that the paths to spiritual perfection were studied in depth and made into a science. Hinduism opens four main paths for the attainment of higher direct intuitive experience. These are called Yogas. We shall discuss these briefly one by one.

Karma-yoga

First of all comes Karma-yoga. Here the main emphasis is on detaching the will from the result of action. This is what is called working without motive. This is not as easy as many people imagine. It requires tremendous will power. But there is an easier way of detaching oneself from the fruit of one's actions. That is to surrender the fruit at the feet of the Lord. You know the most sublime line at the very beginning of the *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad,* 'All that is changeful in this world is to be covered by God'.[9] The whole world belongs to God. Realizing this, one should give up every form of desire. 'The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord', said Job, a Hebrew sage of the 'Old Testament' when he was subjected to severe trials and sufferings.[10] When the

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[९] ईशा वास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किंच जगत्यां जगत्।
Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad, 1

[10] *Bible,* Job, 1:21

mind gets purified through detachment and self-surrender, the Ātman within slowly begins to shine forth.[11]

Rāja-yoga

Then comes the path of meditation or Rāja-yoga. Here the main struggle is to prevent thoughts about sense objects from arising in the mind, and make the mind flow along higher channels. For the vast majority of people this is simply an impossible feat. To attempt it without previous preparation may bring tremendous reactions. Hence Patañjali, the chief exponent of this path, has made it a graded series. First of all come *yama* and *niyama,* that is, moral disciplines — general and individual. One should practise at all times non-injury, truthfulness, chastity, non-covetousness, and non-dependence on others. Learn to stand on your own feet. Practise cleanliness and contentment. Read and think deeply and assimilate the ideas. Surrender everything to God, the Teacher of all teachers. After attaining success in all these, one may practise sitting in a particular posture and learn to control one's breath, which means control of the flow of cosmic Energy in the body and the mind. This is what is called *prāṇāyāma.* Some people give excessive importance to this but are often unable to handle the forces playing within them. The result may be temporary or even permanent unsettlement of the brain. Patañjali gives only a minor role to *prāṇāyāma* in his scheme of spiritual life. The next two steps in Rāja-yoga are withdrawal of the senses from the external objects, and fixing the mind on some spiritual idea. When this inner concentration deepens, one realizes oneself as the Puruṣa or Self.

Bhakti-yoga

The third path is Bhakti-yoga. Here also there is need for discipline, but the main emphasis is on giving a Godward turn to one's impulses. Attachment to the world should be changed to love for God. Hatred should be replaced by renunciation. Fear should be replaced by self-surrender to the Divine. Along with that, one should constantly remember the Lord. For this the devotee takes the help of sound-symbols called *mantras. Mantras* are short mystic formulas. Then there are hymns and devotional songs which are longer. With the help of all this the devotee must think of the Lord constantly. Then, through His grace, he overcomes all the obstacles in spiritual life and gets His vision.

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[11] See Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works,* op. cit., Vol. VII, pp. 179, 198, 22.

Jñāna-yoga

When we come to Jñāna-yoga, we find that a higher standard of morality, a higher qualification, is demanded of the aspirant to embark on the spiritual adventure called Self-realization. He should be self-controlled, must have infinite patience and faith, and must be able to practise concentration. He should be able to discriminate between the Real and the unreal and should be able to give up all desires for enjoyment here and hereafter. Finally, he must have *mumukṣuttvaṁ,* that is, tremendous longing to be free from all limitations. It is not very easy to have all this.

Jñāna is not book knowledge. The Upaniṣads speak of two kinds of *vidyā* or knowledge. One is *aparā* or lower and the other is *parā* or superior. *Aparāvidyā* is that which one gets through sense perception and inference. Reading comes under this. *Parāvidyā* is direct intuitive experience of the ultimate Reality. The whole aim of Jñāna-yoga is to gain this superconscious experience — not indulging in hair-splitting arguments about philosophical points as it often becomes.

One begins with *śravaṇa,* that is, reading or hearing from a *guru* about spiritual truths. These truths have been aphoristically expressed in the four great *mahāvākyas* (great statements) of the Upaniṣads. But one should not stop with hearing alone; one should think deeply on what one hears until a deep conviction about the nature of the Truth and the possibility of attaining It is gained. This is called *manana.* Very often people never do this even about the ordinary things they read. I am reminded of a story. A teenage girl was invited to dinner and she was sitting by the side of an eminent astronomer. His prepossessing appearance attracted the girl a little, and so she asked him, 'What is the profession you are following?' In a humble way he said, 'I study astronomy.' The girl was disappointed. She thought the venerable-looking gentleman would give a better answer. She said, 'What, at this age you are still studying astronomy? I finished my astronomy last year.' Her knowledge of astronomy had ended with the reading of a few books. After *manana* comes *nididhyāsana.* By this is meant a higher form of meditation which is a direct enquiry into the nature of the Self. It is actually a deep inner search for the Reality by the process of *neti, neti,* 'not this', 'not this'.

The goal of Yoga

Every human soul is an eternal portion of the supreme Spirit. Śrī Kṛṣṇa says in the *Gītā:*

> An eternal portion of myself, the supreme Spirit, having become a living soul in the world of life, draws the five senses and the mind.
>
> When the individual being obtains a body or leaves it, it is as though a wind were taking away fragrance from a flower.[12]

So long as there is ignorance, so long as there is desire, a man must pass through repeated births and deaths. This cycle comes to an end as soon as the individual soul becomes united with the Oversoul, the *jīvātman* with the *Paramātman.*

The goal of all the Yogas is the attainment of consciousness of this unity, not intellectually but through a realization of identity. Only then can the highest spiritual experience of the supreme Truth become a reality. It is the ignorance inherent in all human life that identifies the soul with the ego, the mind and the senses. Even if the individual realizes that his true nature is different from his mind and body, he finds it hard to get rid of his ego. Sri Ramakrishna used to compare it to the *aśvattha* tree; even if the tree is cut down, it will sprout again.[13]

The false ego must be purified and spiritualized. In all the paths of Yoga this is the paramount aim. Karma-yoga teaches us to offer the fruits of work to the Supreme Spirit, and try, through service, to put the individual will in tune with the cosmic Will. In the same spirit, Rāja-yoga invests all its disciplines with a sense of transcendence and dedication, with constant emphasis on strengthening the inner sublime awareness through *japa* and meditation. Bhakti-yoga inculcates the attitude of loving devotion and service as an instrument of God. The 'I' is thus spiritualized one way or other. There is no harm in thinking of God at first as Father or Friend; but it is only when the sense of separate personality is lost in the perception of the Absolute that we begin to know the bliss of the undivided Self. Jñāna-yoga aims at experiencing the identity of the soul and the Supreme Spirit through self-analysis and meditation on the meaning of Upaniṣadic passages like *tat tvam asi* ('That thou art') etc.

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[12] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 15.7,8

[13] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* op. cit., p. 31

What is basic to all these Yogas is *tapas* (discipline). In the *Bhagavad Gītā* Śrī Kṛṣṇa speaks about threefold *tapas,* the discipline of body, mind, and speech.[14] *Tapas* of the body signifies cleanliness, uprightness and continence. Speaking words that never give offence but are truthful and beneficial, and also recitation of scriptural texts, form austerity of speech. If we follow this rule we must examine our habits of speech and forego useless and harmful words. Serenity, gentleness, silence, sense control and purity of heart — these constitute *tapas* of the mind. All these disciplines are to be practised with steadfast faith and intensity. Moreover, there must be breadth of vision too. In spiritual life we need Śrī Kṛṣṇa's system of renouncing the fruits of one's actions, Śaṁkara's path of direct self-analysis, Caitanya's way of ecstatic love for God. We can also derive benefit from Buddha's Eightfold Path, Christ's Sermon on the Mount, and Mohammed's concept of universal brotherhood. All these are steps that prepare the soul to realize its true divine nature, and they have been stressed by the mystics of all religions.

The individual is inseparable from the Universal. This is the truth revealed by that higher intuition which follows the purification of mind. In all paths of Yoga, spiritual practice stems from love, and the sense of unity with the Supreme Spirit leads inevitably to the realization of unity with all humanity. With the repetition of the divine Name, and constant remembrance of the divine Spirit dwelling in the hearts of all, the devotee sweetens his life and learns to merge his ego into the divine Consciousness. His individual consciousness becomes merged into the Universal as a wave merges into the ocean. He realizes, 'In my essential nature I am Brahman. I am none other than the Supreme Spirit.' This realization is the source of the joy that we find in every truly illumined man. As a man comes to realize his unity with the eternal Existence, as the soul becomes united with the blissful Spirit, it realizes this oneness with all mankind. Everyone can at least get a glimpse of the divine Grace and Love that is reflected in all hearts. Dissatisfaction with life is then replaced by a sense of peace that makes it a heaven on earth. The spiritual path may begin with misery, but as the unity of the Spirit is experienced as actual reality, we may be able to bring light to those who sit in darkness. Thus spiritual experience is needed not only for one's own happiness and peace but also for that of others.

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[14] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 17.14-16

CHAPTER 3

THE SOUL AND ITS DESTINY

The problem of problems

Faith in the pre-existence of the soul is a common feature of Hinduism, while faith in the post-existence or immortality of the soul is common to almost all the great religions of the world. In his lecture on 'Reincarnation', Swami Vivekananda says:

> Of the many riddles that have perplexed the intellect of man in all climes and times, the most intricate is himself. Of the myriad mysteries that have called forth his energies to struggle for solution from the very dawn of history, the most mysterious is his own nature. It is at once the most insoluble enigma and the problem of all problems. As the starting-point and repository of all we know and feel and do, there never has been, nor will be, a time when man's own nature will cease to demand his best and foremost attention.[1]

Each generation passes on to the next this problem of the nature of the soul and its destiny, the great mystery of life and death. But fortunately, there are always a few intrepid and earnest souls who try to unravel the mystery and find a solution through Self-realization. Let us make an effort, then, to follow in the footsteps of these great ones. If we try hard enough and persistently enough, we may solve the problem for ourselves.

In the remarkable book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the little girl Topsy is asked: 'Do you know who made you?' 'Nobody, as I knows on', says the child, with a short laugh, and adds, 'I s'pec' I jes' grow'd. Don't think nobody never made me.' Do we ever think like that? There are many grown-ups in this strange world of ours who are not at all interested in this problem. But there are also some who cannot help asking the question: Where do we come from? Have we been created like the things we see around us? Did we exist before our birth in this world and shall we continue to exist after death? Such questions have been asked again and again, down the ages. In the words of Walt Whitman,

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[1] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1966), Vol. IV, p. 257

> The two old, simple problems ever intertwined
> Close home, elusive, present, baffled, grappled,
> By each successive age insoluble, pass'd on
> To ours today — and we pass on the same.[2]

The biological explanation

Western biologists divide the life of an individual multicellular organism — be it a fly, a bird, a beast, or man — into five different phases: the formation of the individual by the process called 'fertilization'; the period of development; the period of adult stability; senescence; and death, the terminal event of the cycle. According to most biologists, the organism comes into being, with all its characteristics, through the process of hereditary transmission. There is no place for individual or personal immortality which the organism may attain through its progeny or descendants. Those organisms which do not reproduce their species ultimately cease to exist.

The Hindu conception of immortality

Quite distinct from this view, there is another theory presented to us by the ancient Hindu spiritual teachers. They tell us that the physical life of every being passes through a cycle of six changes: birth, existence, growth, transformation, decline and destruction.[3] Destruction only means death of the form of the body. By death is meant that the being ceases to exist physically but does not cease to be; its life continues on a subtler plane, closer to the Source. After a short interval the soul is reborn in a new body. The soul is never destroyed but its physical medium undergoes a cycle of changes. Swami Vivekananda observes:

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[2] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, (Aventine Press, New York, 1931), p. 530

[3] See Śaṁkara's commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, trans. Mahadeva Sastri (Madras: Samata books, 1981), p. 42

> Of all the theories that have been held by man about himself, that of a soul entity separate from the body and immortal, has been the most widespread, and among those that held the belief in such a soul the majority of the thoughtful had always believed also in its pre-existence.[4]

From personal direct experience, the teachers of Vedānta tell us that the soul or the spiritual entity, which passes through repeated embodiment, is immortal in itself. It existed before its 'birth' and will continue to live eternally, even though it may pass through a series of 'births' and 'deaths'. To use a modern analogy — like the spectrum which is not merely the visible band of light but also that which extends beyond the violet and the red rays — the soul has an infinite past and also an infinite future. The soul of man is part of an infinite Existence which connects the past, the present and the future, and transcends both time and space. The past and the future existences of the spirit are not known to us but in reality there is a continuum of existence. Though nobody can deny the existence of his own self, its real nature can be understood only through the power of higher intuition. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* says:

> This Self cannot be seen through physical eyes for It is without visible form. But It can be realized in the depths of the purified heart. Those who know It become immortal.[5]

The Law of Karma as well as the doctrine of transmigration is applicable only to bound souls, those people who identify themselves with their ego, mind, senses, and body. They are born again and again. But those in whom a new, higher consciousness has dawned are freed from the false identification and, realizing their true nature as the infinite Spirit, are freed from the cycle of birth and death. They become immortal.

The subtle body is born again and again in new gross bodies and gains fresher experiences. After each physical death the subtle body may remain in the subtle worlds for a time until the time for rebirth comes close.[6] All this takes place according to the unknown laws of the spiritual world.

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[4] *The Complete Works*, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 258

[5] *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 2.3.9

Every soul has to undergo these cycles of births and deaths until it realizes its real nature as the supreme, immutable, self-luminous Consciousness, the Ātman. The real Self or Ātman is neither born nor does it die. It is, as Srī Kṛṣṇa says in the *Gītā, Ajo nityaḥśāśvato-ayam purāṇo...* (This Self is unborn, eternal, immortal and though ancient, is ever fresh).[7] According to Vedānta, it is *ajñāna* or primordial ignorance that creates the notion of bondage for the Ātman which is intrinsically ever free. This identification of the Self with the not-Self has been there from beginningless time. And as long as it lasts, the Ātman remains the finite, individualized self or the ego, and is born repeatedly. Under the spell of ignorance man forgets his divine nature. But there comes a time in the life of every man when he begins to feel, dimly or vaguely at first, something about his spiritual nature. The soul of man wakes up, as it were, from its eternal slumber and then begins the struggle to realize its real nature. With the final dawn of higher consciousness, with the true spiritual awakening, when the soul realizes its spiritual nature and its inseparable connection with the supreme Spirit, all *karmas* fall off. The cycle of birth and death stops. As Swami Vivekananda said, we too can then say, 'My play is done.'[8]

The Law of Karma in Indian thought

The doctrine of transmigration is only an extension of the Law of Karma. The word *karma* means not only action, physical and mental, but also reaction — reaction of the mind to external stimuli. The forces generated by actions, good or bad, produce good or bad consequences which affect the doer, i.e. one who performs actions in an egocentric way with a view to getting results. Thus the Law of Karma is actually the law of causation. It is the great moral law which in its individual and collective aspects guides the destinies of individuals and society.

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[6] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 2.22, 8.16

[7] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 2.20, Also see *Kaṭha Upaniṣad,* 1.2.18

[8] *The Complete Works,* op. cit., Vol. VI (1963), pp. 175-77

Every action produces two kinds of results. One is the cosmic effect which determines our future experiences – happiness or misery. The second effect of *karma* is individual. Every action leaves behind an impression in the mind called *saṁskāra*. Thousands of such *saṁskāras* are stored up in our mind which get activated again later on as tendencies or *vāsanās*. And these subtle impressions determine the course of our future births. This is not as mysterious as we think. If we analyze our own minds, we find that many of our present thoughts had their origin in our childhood. Certain ideas and experiences received in childhood leave deep marks in our minds. As we grow, as the films of our minds are developed, we are surprised to find what an amount of pictures and ideas we have in our minds. It is like the playing back of a tape-record. Very often, we forget the source of some of our tendencies. But through introspection we can trace them to our early childhood and even to our previous births. Some of our dreams when analyzed give us a wealth of details about our past; often they point to experiences of past lives.

The Law of Karma has got two aspects: the binding one and the freeing one. *Karma,* when done with egotism and attachment, binds the soul more and more. Repeated sense enjoyments make previous impressions stronger and drag the person down to the plane of birth and death. But when *karma* is done with detachment, as a service to the Lord or purely for the welfare of others, it leads to the liberation of the soul. Detachment of the self can be practised either through constant self-analysis and alertness, or by constant self-surrender to the Divine. When this is done, no new impressions are created and the old ones do not become stronger. Gradually, all the previous impressions of the mind lose their sway over us. This is called the purification of the mind. This is achieved through *karma*. Thus *karma* in itself is not bad. It is the way we do it that determines whether it binds us or not.

All schools of philosophy in India, whether they are theistic or non-theistic, accept the Law of Karma. But the real question is: has the Supreme Being or God got any connection with the working of this law? Is there a divine Will behind its operation? A story is told of the great French astronomer and mathematician Laplace who laid the foundation of the theory of 'Spherical Harmonics'. When he presented his famous book, *The Celestial Mechanism,* to Napoleon, the Emperor asked him about the place of God in his system. The astronomer quietly replied: 'Sir, I have done without that hypothesis.' Well, to many scientists God is just a hypothesis which one can dispense with. Agnosticism or atheism, ignoring or denying the existence of God, has become somewhat fashionable nowadays with a class of superficial thinkers in various fields like science, economics, politics, etc. This theory is often flaunted as modern, and many youngsters in India are taking to it more and more.

Now, when we try to understand the minds of such people, we find that they are not mature or deep. They lack the earnestness or capacity to go deep down into their own minds or even to think deeply about any subject. In fact, it is not an easy thing to think deeply. This requires a disciplined mind. Most of the so-called modern materialists want only to repeat the ideas of some others and follow them blindly. I am reminded of a story. A teacher was teaching arithmetic to small children. She set a problem for them to solve. 'I have twelve sheep', said she. 'Six of them jump the fence and run away. How many would be left?' Most of the boys answered, 'Six'. But a farmer's boy quietly said, 'None would be left.' When the teacher questioned him about it, the boy said: 'Ma'm, you may know arithmetic but I know the ways of sheep.' Here is a lesson for us. We should not follow others blindly like sheep. As a scientist put it: 'For most people, the spinal cord is enough; the brain is something redundant.' That means most people lead instinctive, impulsive lives. Very few people really think and consciously guide their own lives.

There is nothing modern about materialism. In ancient India we had a school of thinkers called the *Cārvākas.* They denied the existence of God, the soul, and immortality, and held that purpose of life was gross sense enjoyment. They never seemed to have had much influence on the people. But have the old *Cārvākas* disappeared? They are hiding in many of us, who profess religion but in actual life follow the materialistic conception of life.

As distinct from these superficial materialistc thinkers, we had in ancient India deep, serious philosophic minds who nevertheless denied the existence of God — at least the God we generally speak about. But they all admitted the working of the Law of Karma and, with the possible exception of the Buddhists, believed in the reality and immortality of the soul. The words *āstika* and *nāstika* refer not to theists and atheists, but to the 'orthodox' and the 'unorthodox', respectively. *Āstikas* are those who believe in the supreme authority of the Vedas, and *nāstikas* are those who do not. The Buddhists and the Jains belong to the latter category. Among the *āstikas* the Sāṁkhyas and some of the Mīmāṁsakas do not accept the existence of God. The souls according to them are bound by the Law of Karma whose operation is inexorable.

The Buddhists, on the other hand, denied the existence of the soul itself, at the same time accepting the Law of Karma. This landed many of them in a curious position. Human personality is by them compared to a chariot. The chariot consists of an aggregate of parts like the wheels etc. and, apart from these, the 'chariot' has no independent existence. In the same way, the human body is an aggregate of many elements which nevertheless continues to be born according to the Law of Karma. There is the story of an old wood-cutter who was proud of his shining axe. When anybody praised the axe, the old man would beam with joy and say: 'Come, my boy. I have been using it ever since I was twenty, and still see how fine it looks! Only the blade has been changed six times and the handle eight times.' The old man was under the impression that he was still using the same axe! The Buddhists say that the continuity of the self through a series of rebirths is a similar illusion.

Having lived several years in the West I am able to understand the religious climate better. India is the land of Vedānta, which believes in the existence of a divine Power guiding the destinies of all beings. Vedānta does not believe that an unconscious law could work out the destinies of conscious living beings. There must be a conscious Being, an intelligent Power, who is the ultimate controller and guide of the universe. So in the *Nyāya-Sūtras* we find an aphorism: 'God is the ultimate cause, because the effort (*karma*) of man does not always bear fruit.'[9] Of all the various systems of philosophy in India, Vedānta alone has given paramount importance to God and has triumphed and flourished. All those schools which denied the existence of God have either disappeared from its soil or have merged in the mainstream of Vedānta.

We hear about gigantic machines and most intricate computers and are very much impressed by their efficient work. But we forget that there are intelligent beings who have discovered these and are operating them. In the same way, though this infinite and mysterious universe seems to be going all by itself, it is guided by a cosmic Being who is of the nature of supreme Intelligence and is immanent in all beings. You sow a seed in the ground and pour some water. The seed germinates and grows. Are we to believe that there is a personal Deity, Nārāyaṇa or Śiva, sitting somewhere out there in Vaikuṇṭha or Kailāsa, directing the growth of the seed? There is divinity hidden in all beings. It is this immanent divine Principle that controls all the life movements. Some of the western philosophers too speak of an immanent cosmic Will. The Law of Karma is under the guidance of the divine Will. But God Himself is beyond its control. He is ever free and ever pure and is of the nature of supreme consciousness and bliss.

Vedānta further believes that man need not always go on performing actions. Actions are to be performed only as long as the soul is not awakened to the inner Reality. When the soul realizes its real nature to be the same as the Divine, it too goes beyond the operation of the Law of Karma; it becomes free. This final freedom from the cycle of births and deaths is the goal of life, according to Vedānta. In the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* we find a beautiful imagery illustrating this point:

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[९] ईश्वरः कारणं पुरुष-कर्माफल्य-दर्शनात्।

Gautama, *Nyāya-Sūtras*, 4.1.19

There are two birds of beautiful plumage dwelling on the same tree. One bird eats the fruits of the tree — some bitter, some sweet — while the other, sitting at the top of the tree, simply looks on, being perfectly unattached. After sometime the lower bird looks up, realizes its oneness with the upper bird and, stopping eating, also attains supreme Peace. The lower bird stands for the Jīva, the individual soul, which is bound by *karma* and enjoys and suffers repeatedly. But when it realizes its oneness with the supreme Spirit, represented by the upper bird, it becomes freed from all attachments and limitations and gets established in its own glory.[10]

It is not necessary to remain bound by the Law of Karma and be ground by its wheel. There is a way to free oneself from its painful cogs. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā,* Kṛṣṇa teaches Arjuna the direct path to free himself from the bondage of *karma.* 'Give up all your *dharma* and *adharma* and surrender yourself to Me unconditionally. I will save you from all bondage. Do not grieve.'[11] That is the Divine promise to mankind. All the great Incarnations have given such a promise to mankind. The difficulty is to have faith in it and surrender oneself wholeheartedly to the Divine.

Pre-existence and reincarnation of the soul in western thought

Centuries ago, Plato declared: 'Individual souls are eternal, having existed before they came into bodies which are like prisons. Self-knowledge alone can make the soul free. This knowledge is not a new thing. It is a recall, a remembrance of what has been forgotten.'[12]

The pre-existence and immortality of the soul was a fundamental doctrine not only of Plato, but also of many other great thinkers of ancient days, such as the Orphics and the Pythagoreans.

Plotinus (A.D. 205-270), the founder of Neo-Platonism, held that the human soul is part of the world-soul. It turned towards matter and fell from the spiritual state. It must struggle to free itself from the bondage of matter. If it fails, it enters other bodies after death. It passes through a series of births and deaths until it is entirely freed of all material impurity. When purification is attained through various forms of discipline, the soul unites with the world-soul and ultimately with the Godhead.

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[10] *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad,* 3.1.1,2

[11] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 18.66

[12] S.E. Frost, *The Basic Teachings of the Great Philosophers* (New York: The New Home Library, 1942) pp. 174-75

The Kabbalists tried to introduce the doctrine into Judaism. In the 'New Testament' also we find unmistakable references to the doctrine of rebirth. During the vision of the Transfiguration on the top of the mountain, the apostles saw the figures of Moses and Elias on either side of Jesus. Elias (or Elijah) was an ancient Jewish prophet. Referring to him Jesus said: 'That Elias is come already', and his disciples understood that he was referring to John the Baptist. Christ considered the Baptist as reincarnation of Elias.[13]

The Manicheans and the Gnostic sects of the early Christian Church believed in the pre-existence of the soul as much as in its existence after death. Origen (A.D. 185-251), one of the greatest of the early Christian scholars, declared: 'The human mind is influenced now by good, now by evil. The causes of this I suspect to be more ancient than the corporeal birth.' But this idea was certainly against the doctrine of orthodox Christianity, and was firmly suppressed by the Christian Church. In A.D. 543, the Council of Constantinople declared: 'If anyone maintains the legendary pre-existence of souls and the monstrous idea of restitution which follows from it, let him be anathema.'[14] But in spite of the efforts of the organized Church, the doctrine could not be suppressed completely. It continued to thrive in other countries and even in Christian lands in many mystical sects. During the Renaissance the doctrine was upheld by the Italian monk and philosopher, Giordano Bruno (A.D. 1548-1600), who believed in divine Immanence, and in the immortality of the human soul. He was imprisoned, tortured, and burnt at the stake. He died, but he helped to free philosophy from the bondage of theology.

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[13] *Bible*, St. Matthew; 17:12

[14] *Encyclopaedia of Religions and Ethics*, Edited by James Hastings, Vol. IV, 1967, p. 193

Such was its power, however, that the doctrine of reincarnation could, at best, be only driven underground. It continued to influence the thought of many through the centuries although people were afraid to speak of it openly. And with the end of the Inquisition, thinkers, poets and philosophers began to express their ideas more freely.

Thomas Huxley (1825-1895), the great follower of Darwin, believed in the theory of reincarnation and he was bold enough to state: 'Every sentient being is reaping as it has sown, if not in this life, then in one or other of the infinite series of antecedent existences, of which it is the latest term.' To him, a scientist, nothing could happen without a cause. He further states: 'Like the doctrine of evolution itself, that of transmigration has its roots in the world of reality.'

Emerson (1803-1882), and some of his New England contemporaries thought along the same lines. Emerson was influenced by the teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gītā,* and he was brave enough to say: 'There are stairs below us which we have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one which continue upward, out of sight.'

Poets live closer to the Spirit, and in their own inimitable ways, give expression to what they believe to be the truth. Thus Wordsworth says:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar.

Tennyson speaks of lower lives through which the soul has come without remembrance:

If through lower lives I came,
I might forget my weaker lot,
For is not our first year forgot?

Walt Whitman, in his brave way, gave expression to the same thought, though we do not know from whom he got these ideas:

As to you, life, I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths;
No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before.

A strange idea, but one shared by many. A growing number of people are finding the idea of reincarnation very logical. The German dramatist and critic, Lessing (1729-1781), asked: 'Why should I not come back as often as I am capable of acquiring fresh knowledge, fresh experience?' And Fichte, the nineteenth-century German philosopher, said, 'It is a well-known argument that that which has a beginning in time must perish in time. Hence the post-mortem existence of the soul necessarily implies its pre-existence.' During my seventeen years of stay in the West I got the impression that a large number of people have faith in reincarnation. And if many have not openly avowed it, it is for fear of the Church. A well-known American preacher and author, Dr. Pratt, visited India in the early part of this century. Regarding the theory of reincarnation, he wrote: 'Personally I do not believe in transmigration. But I am open to conviction.' And he writes further: 'I feel very strongly the nobility and beauty of the doctrine. There is an undeniable dignity in the Hindu conception of the soul, pursuing its long pilgrimage through dying bodies and decaying worlds, until at last it reaches its home in the Endless Sea.' And 'The Hindu does not believe he is entering into eternal life. He believes he is living the eternal life already.'[15]

Great teachers had knowledge of past lives

The question is asked — I heard it many times during my long stay in the West — 'If we had a past, why don't we remember it?' Now, is it not a blessing that we forget so many of our past experiences? If all the memories of only one life, say the present life, should come together to us all of a sudden or one by one continuously, what would happen to us? Most of us would go mad, and we won't find any place where we could go and stay as patients. Countless mental hospitals would have to be started. Already their number is growing and we cannot afford to have more. I am not begging the question. I am only stating the fact that mother Nature makes us forget much of our past so that we may begin a new chapter in our lives with new ideas, new aspirations, and new hopes.

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[15] James Bisset Pratt, *India and Its Faiths* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1915), pp. 114-15

Is it possible for us to revive the memory of past lives? People are very inquisitive about their past and also about their future. And so there are astrologers, palmists, crystal-gazers, thought-readers, etc. in India, but more especially in the West. People seem to have greater faith in these things than in God Himself ! I am reminded of a story. A girl went to a mind-reader. She wanted to have all her past impressions read. And the mind-reader told her: 'For important persons I charge $ 100; for others I charge $ 50 to 25. But for your mind $ 5 will do.' What sort of mind did she have?

For people with well-developed, mature minds the help of quacks is not necessary. They would like to discover the truth for themselves. Through Yogic disciplines it is possible to revive memories about our past lives. Patañjali, the great teacher of Yoga, says: 'When freedom from avarice becomes confirmed, the knowledge of the how and wherefore of his previous births comes to the *yogī.*'[16] And, 'By perceiving the impressions of his own mind the *yogī* comes to have the knowledge of his past life.'[17] It is possible to revive the memory of the past, but it is better not to be curious about it.

By meditating on our tendencies with a very pure mind, we get at least a glimpse of the past, which can help us to understand the present and to train ourselves for the future. Some of the greatest teachers of the world knew of their own past lives, and spoke of them to their disciples. Śrī Kṛṣṇa said to Arjuna: 'Many a birth have I passed through, and so have you. I know them all but you know them not.'[18] Christ said:

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[16] अपरिग्रहस्थैर्ये जन्मकथन्तासंबोधः ।
Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtras* 2.39

[17] संस्कारसाक्षात्करणात् पूर्वजातिज्ञानम् ।
ibid., 3.18

[18] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 4.5

'Before Abraham was, I am.'[19] Divine Incarnations speak in this way. They are born with infinite consciousness that remembers the past. That is why they are able to play their part in this drama of life so well.

Buddha never claimed to be a Divine Incarnation, but later on, his followers came to regard him as such. He did speak, however, of having passed through many forms of purification in his series of births, until the time came when he attained *nirvāṇa* or enlightenment.

He was the son of a king and renounced the world in quest of Truth. After attaining illumination, he wanted to share his experience with everyone around him. With begging bowl in hand he went from house to house. His royal father was mortified and remonstrated with his son saying, 'A member of our great family should not be begging his food from door to door.' But Buddha could not be deflected from his course. His reply was: 'King, you claim descent from kings, but my descent is quite different. I am born of the race of Buddhas, and as they have done, begging their food from the charitable, so do I – and it cannot be otherwise.' His consciousness was different from the ordinary. How often do we make too much of the family tree, forgetting that the soul is older than any family tree!

Islam, like the other Semitic religions, does not believe in reincarnation. But when it spread to Persia, it came in contact with other streams of thought, and this gave rise to the mystic movement called Sufism. One of the greatest among the Sufi mystics was Jalālud-Dīn Rūmī who wrote in one of his poems:

I died as mineral and became a plant,
I died as plant and rose to animal,
I died as animal and I was man.
Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?
Yet once more I shall die as man, to soar
With angels blest; but even from angelhood
I must pass on: all except God doth perish.
When I have sacrificed my angel soul,

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[19] *Bible,* St. John, 8:58

I shall become what no mind e'er conceived.
Oh, let me not exist! for Non-existence
Proclaims in organ tones, 'To Him we shall return'.[20]

Testimony from the lives of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda [21]

Ramakrishna once said: 'I have seen Sat-Cit-Ānanda come out of this sheath (meaning his body) and say: "I incarnate myself in every age". '[22] A couple of days before his passing away, his greatest disciple Vivekananda was with him. He had heard the Master say that the supreme Spirit was manifest in him. But Vivekananda was not the man to accept anything without first testing it. A rather curious thought flashed across his mind: 'If now, when his body is about to drop off, I can hear him say that the Divine is born in him, then I would believe that he is truly God Incarnate.' No sooner did this thought come to him than the Master turned towards him and said very distinctly, 'Still not convinced? He who was Rāma and He who was Kṛṣṇa is now born as Ramakrishna in this body.' Vivekananda felt ashamed of himself for his not having believed in the words of his Master earlier.

When Vivekananda came to Ramakrishna for the first time – he was then Narendra, the brilliant, polished college student – the Master told him: 'I know you are one of the ancient sages, born on the earth to remove the misery of mankind.' Young Narendra thought, 'My father lives in Calcutta; I know myself to be such and such a person; yet he says I am an ancient sage!', and concluded that the Master must be mad! The next time Narendra visited him, however, the Master put him into a spiritual trance in which all outward consciousness was lost, and obtained the information he wanted about the disciple. Of this he spoke later: 'I asked him about his antecedents and whereabouts, his mission in this world, and the duration of his mortal life. He dived deep into himself and gave fitting answers. They confirmed what I had seen and felt about him. These things should be kept secret, but I came to know that he was a sage who had attained perfection, that he was a past master in meditation, and that the day he learned of his real nature he would give up the body by an act of will, through Yoga.'

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[20] Jalālud-Dīn Rūmī, quoted by R.A. Nicholson in *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 168

[21] See Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, Vol. I, 1979 and Vol. II, 1981).

[22] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), pp. 694-95

Vivekananda lived a life of intense activity for the sake of promoting the welfare of humanity, a life so intense that his body could not bear it. A few days before his death — he passed away before his fortieth year — some of his brother disciples asked him casually: 'Do you know yet who you are?' Gravely, he replied: 'Yes, I know now.' There followed a grim silence which the brother monks were afraid to break.

A short time later, just three days before his passing away, the Swami pointed to a particular spot on the bank of the Gangā, close to the monastery, and said, 'When I give up my body, cremate it there.' It was just opposite to the place where Ramakrishna's body had been cremated.

Several of the brother disciples were warned by the Swami: 'I am preparing for death.' On the day of his passing away, he practised meditation for three hours, all alone in the chapel. He then took a class in Sanskrit, sometimes talking with his disciples and illustrating his teaching with witty stories. Later on, he went for a long walk and on his return talked for a while with the monks. As evening drew near, the Swami's mind became more and more indrawn. He retired to his room and sat in meditation, facing the Gangā. He had left word that no one was to disturb him. An hour later, he called one of the members of the monastery and requested him to fan him. He then lay down on his bed. His hands trembled a little and breathing became deep. His eyes became fixed, his face assumed a divine expression — and all was over. The spirit had left the body. Was that death?

In Sanskrit, this is not called death, but *mahāsamādhi*. In ordinary *samādhi* the soul returns to the world of sense, but in *mahā* - or supreme *samādhi,* having at last attained to the superconscious plane, the soul has no further need of the body which then falls off. From the physical point of view there is an appearance of death, but actually the soul is set free to dwell in the superconscious.

At the time of the Swami's *mahāsamādhi,* his brother disciple Ramakrishnananda – known as Shashi in his premonastic days – was carrying on the great teacher's work in Madras. A little while after the Swami's passing away, as Ramakrishnananda sat in meditation, he heard someone calling to him: 'Shashi, Shashi, I have spat out my body' [23]; it was a familiar voice, and he instantly recognized it to be that of Vivekananda.

Sri Ramakrishna used to speak of Rakhal (who later on became Swami Brahmananda) as a shepherd boy of Brindavan. He once had a remarkable vision in which he saw a lotus blooming with a hundred petals, each petal shining with exquisite loveliness. On the lotus two boys were dancing with anklets on their feet. One of them was Śrī Kṛṣṇa himself and the other was Rakhal.[24] As in the case of Vivekananda, so also in the case of Swami Brahmananda, this truth of the vision of the Master was verified later on. When he was on his death-bed Swami Brahmananda had a remarkable vision in which he saw the boy Kṛṣṇa in his incomparable beauty asking him to dance with him. In divine ecstasy the Swami cried out: 'I am the shepherd boy. Put anklets on my feet. I want to dance with Kṛṣṇa. . . . Can't you see him? Haven't you eyes to see? My play is over now. Look! The child Kṛṣṇa is caressing me. He is calling me to come away with him! I am coming. . .'[25]

We are all immortal but do not know it

One might ask: 'Granting that some of these highly illumined souls had existed before their birth into this world, what of us, ordinary human beings?' The answer of Vedānta is that the spirit in every one of us is beyond birth and death but owing to ignorance, the soul becomes identified with the body for the satisfaction of desires. In the case of the unillumined, when life is cut short, the body dies, but the soul is brought back to other bodies again and again until the precious experience of dispassion – the forerunner of the illumination which takes one beyond the cycle of birth and death – is gained.

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[23] *The Story of a Dedicated Life* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1958), p. 139

[24] See Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1971), p. 20

[25] ibid., p. 137

Our teachers tell us that human birth is a rare privilege. In this life we are given the opportunity of attaining the highest perfection and Truth. For, not only Divine Incarnations and great illumined teachers, but also we, ordinary human beings, are manifestations of the same Divinity. There are, no doubt, differences in manifestation but the essence of Divinity is the same. We are given the analogy of the ocean, the waves and the bubbles – all of the same substance, different only in manifestation. Vivekananda has declared over and over again: 'Each soul is potentially divine, and the goal is to manifest this divinity within.'[26]

Of this divinity within, the Swami says elsewhere:

> ...there is something in us which is free and permanent. But it is not the body; neither is it the mind. The body is dying every minute. The mind is constantly changing. The body is a combination, and so is the mind; and as such can never reach to a state beyond all change. But beyond this momentary sheathing of gross matter, beyond even the finer covering of the mind is the Ātman, the true Self of man, the permanent, the Ever Free. It is His freedom that is percolating through layers of thought and matter, and in spite of the colourings of name and form, is ever asserting Its unshackled existence. It is His deathlessness, His bliss, His peace, His divinity, that shines out and makes Itself felt in spite of the thickest layers of ignorance. He is the real Man, the fearless One, the deathless One, the Free.... This Being, this Ātman, this real Self of man, the Free, the Unchangeable, is beyond all conditions and as such, it has neither birth nor death. Without birth or death, eternal, ever existing is the Soul of man.[27]

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[26] *The Complete Works,* Vol. I, p. 124

[27] ibid., Vol. IV, p. 256

This Ātman is to be realized through faith, devotion, and meditation. It is the same Ātman that shines in our souls and also shines in all souls. We all reflect the same Light. It is the one infinite Spirit which manifests Itself through all individual souls. Self-knowledge is the realization that the individual self is part of the all-pervading Spirit. Attaining It, all ignorance and desire, even in the subtlest form, disappear. Let us then follow in the footsteps of the illumined ones, realize the Divine within, and unravel the mystery of life and death. It may even be that after illumination we shall be enabled to return to this world for helping others to attain something of this divine knowledge, this spiritual consciousness, this realization of God in man.

CHAPTER 4

DIFFERENT CONCEPTIONS ABOUT GOD

The search for the Absolute

Right from the beginning of human civilization, we find that man has been trying to understand the mystery of the universe. On the one hand, he has been trying to study nature as it is, with all its intricate fields and myriads of living beings. On the other hand, he has been trying to find out the origin of the universe. The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* begins with these age-old questions of the human mind:

> Students of Brahman (i.e. the Vedas) discuss:
> What is the cause? (Is it) Brahman? Whence are we born?
> Why do we live? Where is our final rest?
> Under whose orders are we, who know the Brahman,
> subjected to the law of happiness and misery?[1]

In the next stanza, the sages who put these questions to one another continue the discussion about the possible cause of this universe. They take up Time, Nature, Law, Chance, Matter, Energy, Mind and Ego for examination, and find that none of these nor a combination of these could be the cause of the universe because they are all dependent on something else.[2] After finding that it was impossible to get a solution to these ultimate questions through reason alone, the sages next practised meditation. In the depths of contemplation they realized that supreme immutable Being called Brahman who is the self-luminous power in all beings, and who presides over the functions of everything from Time to Ego.[3]

What is the nature of this supreme Being? Even as early as the beginning of the Vedic period, we find Hindu sages speculating on this theme. The famous 'Nāsadīya Sūkta' of the *Ṛg-Veda* says:

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[1] *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad,* 1.1

[2] ibid., 1.2

[3] ibid., 1.3

> There was neither non-existence nor existence,
> neither this world nor the sky beyond it.
> What covered and where? and what gave shelter?
> Was water there, unfathomed depth of water?
> Death was not then nor immortality, no
> sign there was of day and night.
> That one thing breathless breathed by its own
> nature and there was naught else besides.
> Darkness there was, at first hidden in
> darkness and everything was undifferentiated Being.
> All that existed then was contentless and
> formless, and through *tapas* was born the unity.[4]

The above-quoted stanzas describe the non-dual nature of Brahman as it existed before creation. Even the concept of a pure Absolute Being limits the non-dual Reality. That is why later on in the Upaniṣads we find the ultimate Reality is described using terms like 'not this', 'not this'.

Another school of thought called the Sāṁkhya had a different conception of reality. The Sāṁkhya is a very ancient system of Hindu philosophy, perhaps the oldest. It influenced all the other systems. Its psychology is accepted by almost all the schools of Hinduism. The two fundamental categories of the Sāṁkhya are Puruṣa and Prakṛti. Puruṣa is the spirit and Prakṛti is the ultimate source of all material things including the mind and the senses. There are as many Puruṣas as there are living beings. Puruṣa corresponds to the Jīva (individual self) of the Vedānta. According to both the systems, the Self in its real nature is pure consciousness, infinite and eternal, but owing to ignorance identifies itself with the mind and the body, and is born again and again as a living being. The non-dualistic school of Vedānta has the concept of cosmic ignorance or Māyā which roughly corresponds to the Prakṛti of the Sāṁkhya. In both the schools, knowledge based on discrimination between the Self and the not-Self is considered to be the only means of liberation of the Jīva from its bondage. These are the common points between the Sāṁkhya and the Vedānta.

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[4] *Ṛg-Veda,* 10.129.1-3

But the Vedānta has the concept of an ultimate Reality called Brahman, which is of the nature of Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute, which manifests itself as the souls and the material objects. Again, the Sāṁkhya does not have any place for the supreme Being or Īśvara, as the Vedānta has. All souls come under the same category and if in the Sāṁkhya and the Yoga systems there is any reference to Īśvara, it only means a special type of Puruṣa who is ever free and who is the Teacher of all teachers. But He is not the Creator. Patañjali states that by devotion and self-surrender to this Īśvara one may directly attain *samādhi.* Creation and dissolution of the universe go on eternally in Prakṛti. In the Vedānta the creator of this universe, called Brahmā or Hiraṇyagarbha is lower than Īśvara, the supreme Controller. Īśvara is, according to Swami Vivekananda, man's highest reading of the Absolute.

Another peculiarity of the Vedānta is identification of the Gods, Viṣṇu, Śiva or Devī, with the supreme Godhead or Īśvara. The Incarnations are also often identified with Īśvara. The *Bhāgavatam* refuses to count Śrī Kṛṣṇa as one of the Incarnations of God; He is none other than the supreme Godhead — *Kṛṣṇastu bhagavān svayam.*[5] So in a prayer of gods and sages to Kṛṣṇa we find the statement:

> Receiving energy from Thee, the Puruṣa, of Infallible power, along with Māyā holds within himself the *mahat,* like the embryonic state of this universe. This *mahat,* backed by the same Māyā, projected from within itself the golden sphere of the universe of various layers.[6]

This kind of identification of the Incarnation with the supreme Being is found in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* also which says:

> There are two Puruṣas in the world; the Perishable and the Imperishable. All beings constitute the Perishable, and the *kūṭastha* (which, according to Śaṁkara, refers to Māyā or

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[5] *Bhāgavatam,* 1.3.28

[6] ibid., 11.6.16

> primordial Nescience) is called the Imperishable. But there is another, the Highest Self, the Immutable Lord, who pervades the three worlds and sustains them. As I transcend the Perishable and am above even the Imperishable, I am celebrated in the world and in the scriptures, as the Puruṣottama.[7]

Place of Personal God in spiritual life

In the Holy Personality the devotee sees a link between the finite and the Infinite. First he is drawn by the wonderful charm of the Personality and then, through it, realizes the Infinite.

We need something to centre our feelings upon, and if we do not feel attracted to some Holy Form, some Holy Personality, we naturally take up some human idol and become attached to it. But in these Great Ones, though we are at first charmed by the human aspect, later on we find the Divine in them. Here lies the necessity of the worship of an Incarnation. If we want to construct a building, we must find a model. In these Godmen we find that their bodies and minds are like glass cases through which shines the Cosmic Spirit, whereas ours is at best an iron case. Our task is to transmute this iron case into a glass case. Through their superhuman spiritual endeavour the Godmen have shown us the way to transmute the iron case into a glass case. Even these Godmen had to perfect their bodies and minds through regular spiritual practice and culture. They too had to perfect their instruments. In the descriptions of these Godmen in the Purāṇas (mythology) we find a wonderful blending of the Personality and the Principle. In their case the superconscious is manifest through the conscious, and if we are attracted by their human aspect, we will come in touch with the divine aspect in due course.

Even the out-and-out Advaitin (non-dualist) is prepared to place before us thoughts that can be understood and grasped by us in our present state. He is willing to take us by the hand and lead us on to higher and higher truths. Idolatry is a necessary stage which people must outgrow. And if people do not take up some holy idol to centre their feelings and emotions upon, they will take up some awful human idol, some man puppet or woman puppet, and worship that and become slaves to that.

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[7] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 15.16-18

Which is the better idol: an ordinary idol of flesh and blood, or an idol which represents a higher ideal? In the human idol you do not find a higher ideal. And if you try to think of the abstract, the abstract becomes and remains abstract while the human idols, the man puppets or the woman puppets, attract all our attention, become essentially real to us, and then everything else follows as a matter of course.

To the extent we are able to think of the Divine in us as distinct from our personality, as distinct from this man form or woman form of ours, to that extent we will be able to think of the Divine in others too as distinct from their form, as distinct from their personality. And then we will be safe. Then we will never become slaves to any male or female puppet.

The conceptions about the nature of the divine Being whom men seek vary with the growth in the knowledge of themselves. Sri Ramakrishna observes: 'There are three classes of devotees. The lowest one says, "God is up there." That is, he points to heaven. The mediocre devotee says that God dwells in the heart as the inner controller. But the highest devotee says, "God alone has become everything. All the things that we perceive are so many forms of God." '[8]

Further, he clarifies the relation between the personal and the impersonal aspects of the Godhead as follows: 'Think of Brahman, Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute, as a shoreless ocean. Through the cooling influence, as it were, of the *bhakta's* love, the water has frozen at places into blocks of ice. In other words, God now and then assumes various forms for His lovers and reveals Himself to them as a Person. But with the rising of the sun of Knowledge, the blocks of ice melt. Then one does not feel any more that God is a Person, nor does one see God's forms.'[9]

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[8] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda, (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 346

[9] ibid., p. 78

Change in the conception of God in ancient India

In our study of the Hindu scriptures, we come across various conceptions of the Godhead. Some devotees speak of Him as possessing both divine forms and attributes. They want to establish a personal relationship with Him. Others speak of Him as being endowed with infinite power and knowledge and other qualities, and think that, though formless, He assumes various forms. While they take note of the personal aspect, they particularly stress the impersonal aspect of which the former is a manifestation.

During the early stages of their spiritual life, most devotees cannot help associating human forms and sentiments with the Divine and thinking of Him as outside of themselves. Sometimes we find that, as the result of the self purification brought about by sincere devotion, the devotee gets a vision within himself of the same divine Being he has been so long worshipping as an outside object. Then he realizes Him as the indwelling Spirit, as 'the Ear of ear, the Mind of mind, the Life of life.'[10] Next he finds Him to be the one Deity 'who is in the fire, who is in the water, who is in the plants, who is in the trees, who pervades the whole universe, who has become the woman, the man, the youth, the maiden, the old man leaning on his staff, and is born in manifold forms.'[11] To him God is now the Principle, immanent in all beings and things. He is not merely the God of gods, but is also the true Self of all, the Life Universal. Proceeding further, the seer realizes Him as the transcendental Entity who is 'beyond speech and thought'[12], who is 'invisible, . . . devoid of all connotations, unthinkable, indefinable, essentially of the nature of consciousness constituting the Self alone, . . . the peaceful, the supreme bliss, and the non-dual'.[13]

The Vedic *ṛṣis* worshipped Indra, the thunderer and the giver of rains; Mitra, the god who regulates the course of the sun; Varuṇa, the god who dwells in the bright blue sky and releases the penitent from sin; and Agni, the god of fire, sometimes spoken of as father, and also as brother, kinsman, and friend.[14] Savitṛ, the solar deity who stimulates life and activity in the world, was invoked in order to guide the understanding of the devotees.[15] It was a very striking fact that even at that early stage of spiritual consciousness some of the Vedic seers could recognize the presence of an indwelling Spirit behind each and every natural phenomenon. And behind their apparently polytheistic conceptions there lay an ingrained monotheism that was clearly expressed, as each god was invoked and worshipped in turn as omnipotent, omniscient and even omnipresent. This is made clear in the well-known hymn that declares: 'To what is One, sages give many a name. They call Him Agni, Yama, Mātariśvan.'[16]

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[10] *Kena Upaniṣad,* 1.2

[11] *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad,* 2.17; 4.3

[12] *Taittirīya Upaniṣad,* 2.4.1; 2.9.1

[13] *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad,* 7

After the period of the *Ṛg-Veda,* a revolution took place in Hinduism especially with regard to the symbols and names associated with worship and prayers. Names that were once of minor importance came to be prominent in later times and new names were also added to the pantheon. The worship of Śiva, Viṣṇu, and Devī, and of Incarnations like Rāma and Kṛṣṇa became popular in later times. But in the midst of these striking changes, the Hindu devotee's conception of the supreme Deity, his highest spiritual hopes and aspirations, his desire to seek divine aid and guidance and his yearning for spiritual communion have remained unchanged. With the march of time, it has been recognized with greater clearness that the impersonal Principle forms the background of all personal aspects of God, and is the source of all divine personalities worshipped through various symbols. Indeed, according to Advaita (non-dualistic) Vedānta, whatever be the symbol one may adopt or the personality one may adore to begin with, the highest goal of spiritual life lies in the ultimate experience of the Impersonal, the One-without-a-second, in which the worshipper is merged into and becomes one with the Infinite. In that highest experience all distinctions between man and God, and between God and the world vanish: the One-without-a-second alone remains.

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[14] *Ṛg-Veda,* 1.1.9

[15] ibid., 3.62.10

[16] एकं सद् विप्रा बहुधा वदन्त्यग्निं यमं मातरिश्वानमाहुः ।
Ṛg-Veda, 1.164.46

Based on the above experience, we have in popular Hinduism a number of monistic meditations that negate the not-Self and assert the Self. In his 'Six Stanzas on Nirvāṇa', Śaṁkarācārya states:

> I am neither the mind nor the intellect, neither memory nor ego, I am not the sense of hearing, taste, smell or sight. I am neither the ether nor the earth, nor the fire, nor the air. I am knowledge and bliss absolute. I am the Self all-pervading, I am the Self all-pervading.[17]
>
> I am the indeterminate, changeless and formless, all-pervading and omnipresent. I am beyond the touch of all sense attachments. I am not even freedom, never having had any bondage; I am beyond all relative knowledge. I am the Self all-pervading, I am the Self all-pervading.[18]

This type of meditation is in line with the approach to the Reality followed by some of the boldest of the Upaniṣadic seers in their meditation on the Immutable:

> It is neither gross nor minute, neither short nor long, . . . without eyes or ears, without the vocal organ or mind, without interior or exterior. . . .[19] This Immutable. . . . is never seen, but is the Witness; . . . It is never thought, but is the Thinker; It is never known, but is the Knower.[20]

Besides this lofty conception of the absolute transcendent Reality, the One-without-a-second, there developed in ancient India the ideas of an immanent impersonal divine Principle, which manifests Itself through finite forms and yet remains infinite and formless. This was what later on came to be called the school of 'Qualified non-dualism' (Viśiṣṭādvaita). Many aspirants prefer to worship such a divine Principle, as they feel no interest in the personal aspect of the Divine. The Upaniṣads themselves contain meditations on the divine Immanence in all creation:

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[17] Śaṁkarācārya, 'Nirvāṇa Ṣaṭkam', verse 1

[18] ibid., verse 6

[19] *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad,* 3.8.8

[20] ibid., 3.7.23

> He is below, He is above, He is at the back, He is in the front, He is in the south, He is in the north, He indeed is everywhere and in everything.[21]
>
> He is subtler than the subtlest, vaster than the vastest, the Self seated in the hearts of all beings.[22]
>
> He exists in and through the earth, the air, the sun, the moon and the stars; He controls everything and every being from within; He is the internal Ruler; the immortal Self of the worshipper.[23]

The devotee retains the distinction between him and the Divine. He considers himself as a soul and God as the Soul of all souls.

Personal and impersonal aspects of the Divine

But as Śrī Kṛṣṇa has put it in the *Bhagavad-Gītā:* 'Greater is the difficulty of those whose minds are set on the Impersonal. For, the heights of the Absolute are very hard for embodied beings to reach.'[24] Hence the worship of, and the meditation on, the Impersonal through the personal aspects and symbols, has been most popular in Hinduism in almost all forms of spiritual practice. The aspirant looks upon the Divine as a personal Being endowed with superhuman attributes, who responds to his prayers and worship, and helps him in attaining perfection and bliss. Some of the Upaniṣads contain references to this view of Reality:

> Desirous of emancipation I seek refuge in that effulgent Being, whose light reveals the knowledge of the Ātman; who first created the cosmic Soul (Hiraṇyagarbha) and delivered to Him the supreme Knowledge; who is without parts, without actions,

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[21] *Chāndogya Upaniṣad,* 7.25.1

[22] *Kaṭha Upaniṣad,* 1.2.20

[23] *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad,* 3.7.7

[24] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 12.5

> tranquil, without fault, without taint; who is the supreme bridge to immortality, and is self-effulgent like a blazing fire consuming its fuel.[25]

Even in the concept of a personal God itself there is the distinction between anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic aspects. In Islam God is personal but not anthropomorphic, i.e. God does not have a human form. The God of Islam and Judaism has been described by an eminent writer as anthropopsychic, that is, possessed of human feelings and thoughts but not human form. In Hinduism both anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic concepts are found. In popular Hinduism worship of various deities is practised. This does not however mean that Hinduism is polytheistic. Regarding theistic doctrine, Hinduism is as monotheistic as any other religion, but with this difference: whereas in other religions only one God has been exalted to the status of the Supreme God (for example, Yahweh in Judaism), in Hinduism various gods have been elevated to this rank by their followers. The worshipper of Viṣṇu thinks that Nārāyaṇa is the Supreme Deity and all the other gods are subordinate to Him. The worshipper of Śiva thinks that Śiva is the Supreme God and all the other gods are minor ones. Such a concept has been called Henotheism by Max Müller. This has enabled Hinduism to integrate diverse thought-currents and religious ideals in its fold.

The idea of one Supreme God — who is exalted above all gods — has been an abiding fact in the religious consciousness of the Hindu. But so far as the names of gods are concerned there has taken place a great revolution as we have already pointed out. Names like Viṣṇu and Śiva that were of minor importance during Vedic period came to be very prominent in later times, while those like Indra, Mitra and Varuṇa have been practically forgotten. Besides, the worship of Incarnations like Rāma and Kṛṣṇa has come to prevail everywhere. And it has been recognized more and more that the Formless or the Impersonal is the background of all the Divine

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[25] *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad,* 6.18,19

Personalities which are the manifestations of the immutable unmanifested Principle. There are sectarians who might speak of the superiority of their particular gods, Incarnations, and Prophets, but seers having the totality of vision have regarded all personalities, either of gods or godmen, to be diverse expressions of the Impersonal. Just as an ocean gives rise to innumerable waves but continues to be infinite and unfathomable as ever, so also the ultimate Reality remains immutable even though giving rise to various gods. Indeed, men of the highest spiritual illumination have realized that whatever may be the Holy Personality one may begin with, the goal of spiritual life lies in the experience of the Impersonal — the One-without-a-second — in which the worshipper and the Worshipped, nay, God, souls and the universe get merged and become one and indivisible.

From gods to the Godhead

The Impersonal is beyond the reach of the devotee, while the Personal does not satisfy his philosophic sense. Hence the worship of the Personal-Impersonal has been most popular in all higher forms of spiritual practice. And this is true of the worshippers of Kṛṣṇa or Rāma, Śiva or Viṣṇu, Durgā or Kālī.

The worship of the divine Personality or the incarnated Principle has certainly an unquestionable place in spiritual life; it is indispensable for most devotees. As Śrī Kṛṣṇa has declared in the *Bhagavad-Gītā,* the path of the Absolute and the Unmanifest is very hard to follow. Hence we find that in many religious faiths the devotee worships the Lord, the Divine Person, resigning all his actions to Him, meditating on Him with devotion and concentration, and regarding Him as the supreme goal of life. But the true devotee does not stop with worshipping the anthropomorphic form of the Lord. He gradually learns to look upon the divine form that he worships as an embodiment of the attributes that reveals the supreme Principle in some way or other. He further learns to look upon the divine form as a divine symbol or a divine idea, and this idea, again, becomes a symbol of the Reality that is at the back of everything.

Śiva is one of the gods of popular Hinduism. The gross-minded worshipper may take Him to be the God of destruction, dwelling in the lonely mountains or in the cremation ground. But to the evolved devotee, He is the embodiment of renunciation and the destroyer of all evil. He is, besides, the personification of contemplation and divine consciousness. The advanced worshipper sings His glory thus: 'O Lord, Thou art Brahman, the One-without-a-second. Thou art everything. Thou art the one Truth, and verily there is nothing but Thee.'[26]

The material-minded worshipper of Viṣṇu sees in Him the God of protection and preservation, who, out of His infinite mercy, incarnates Himself for the good of His devotees. But the devotee of the highest type sees in Him the embodiment of the divine Principle that permeates the entire universe, in whom is being enacted the world play with its creation, preservation, and dissolution. And he prays: 'Lord, Thou abidest in all; Thou art all; Thou assumest all forms. Thou art the origin of all. Thou art the Self of all. Salutations unto Thee.'[27]

Worship of God as the Mother

Can we worship God as the Mother? In India we do not ask this question. We take it for granted that the divine Spirit can be worshipped in many ways: not only as the Master, the only mode allowed in Islam and Christianity, but also, as the Mother, as the divine Child, or as the divine Lover. There is nothing unnatural in worshipping God as the Mother. Just as a baby is nursed and nourished by its mother, so also does God create, support and nourish all living beings. To look upon God as the Mother is the most natural way. It is also the most sublime and enduring attitude. There is greater freedom and spontaneity in the devotee's relationship with God as the Mother. As Sri Ramakrishna used to say, just as a child can force its demands on its mother, so can the devotee force his demand on God. He gives another illustration: As long as the child is playing with its toys, the mother busies herself with household chores. But when the child throws away the toys and cries out for its mother, the mother keeps down the cooking pot and runs to the child. This beautiful analogy illustrates the strong bond that exists between the Divine conceived as the Mother, and the devotee.

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[26] See Swami Yatiswarananda, *Universal Prayers* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1977), verse 120.

[27] *Viṣṇu Purāṇa,* 1.12.72

The conception of God as the Mother is not a Hindu creation. It prevailed in many countries in ancient times. Some of these Mother cults were degenerate, but we are concerned with the ideal of Mother worship. In Egypt She was known as Isis, in Babylonia and Assyria as Ishtar, in Greece as Demeter, and in Phrygia as Cybele. When they were hardpressed by the great Carthagenian military general Hannibal, the Romans worshipped Cybele for success in the war and officially declared her to be the 'mother of gods'. Judaism and later on Islam put an end to Mother worship in the Middle East. Christianity too suppressed it but later on revived it in a modified form.

Catholics venerate Virgin Mary as Theotokos, the Mother of God. Because of theological strictures the Blessed Virgin occupies an inferior position in the Church. But the popular masses do not make such distinctions. Millions of Catholics, especially the poor, worship Virgin Mary more or less in the same way as Hindus worship the Divine Mother. In Warsaw I saw an ancient temple dedicated to the Madonna. In Switzerland I visited a monastery which was over a thousand years old. I saw there monks worshipping the Black Madonna. In Her complexion and appearance She reminded me of the Hindu deity Kālī. The Gregorian chants and the crowds of pilgrims created the familiar atmosphere of a Devī temple in India. Veneration of the Mother of God is steadily gaining ground in Europe and in Latin American countries.

When I was in Europe I was at first baffled by the inability of western people to regard God as the Mother. One lady told me: 'Well, Swami, I myself am a mother, I have my own mother still living. We have strong points and weak points. But we don't see any special sanctity about motherhood. We don't see any divinity in us.' That was of course her misfortune. This reminds me of a story. One day some children were found talking noisily. They were playing a new game about telling lies. The boy who told the biggest lie would get the first prize. Just then a priest came that way and asked the boys what they were doing. When he was told about it he advised the boys, 'My children, you should not tell lies. When I was a boy of your age I never told a lie.' All the boys then shouted in unison, 'Father, you get the first prize.' Children know the ways of children, and women know the ways of women. But they see only the surface, the body and its behaviour, and are unable to see any divinity beyond it.

In the West a woman is looked upon as a sweetheart or wife. The mother does not command respect and love as in a Hindu home. Since theologians teach that Eve was created out of the rib of Adam, woman is always considered inferior to man. This attitude has determined woman's role in western society. If men in the West worshipped God as the Mother, they would be less hard-hearted and sex-conscious and be more spiritual. There would be stronger family bonds and greater domestic peace.

In India the worship of God as the Mother has had an unbroken tradition right from the Vedic times. The Vedas contain a number of hymns addressed to Devī. In the *Kena Upaniṣad* the Mother appears as the embodiment of spiritual knowledge. In later centuries rose a whole body of literature (the Tantras) dedicated to the worship and philosophy of the Divine Mother. In Bengal, Mother worship then attained great refinement, and has since become a part and parcel of the daily life of the people.

With the advent of Sri Ramakrishna, Mother worship has undergone a rejuvenation. All that was dross has been washed away and the Mother shines in a new light in the homes and hearts of millions of people. What did Sri Ramakrishna mean by Mother Kālī? He looked upon Her as the creative Power of the universe. Further he said that She was inseparable from Brahman. The immutable Reality is Brahman; when It manifests as the universe It is Kālī. Just as the blue colour of the sky indicates vastness, the dark complexion of Kālī indicates infinitude. Sri Ramakrishna thus elevates the worship of the image of Kālī to the adoration of the Infinite.

The Mother power, or the divine Energy, has many forms and symbols. She is symbolized variously as the Goddess of Knowledge, as the Goddess of Wealth, and as the Goddess of Death playing the dance of destruction. In the form of Kālī, She is represented as the Power of creation, protection and destruction, and as the Power in which all things rest after dissolution. She stands on the still, prostrate form of Śiva, the representation of the Absolute. This is symbolical of the entire cosmic process with the transcendental Reality as its basis. Reality is beyond both life and death, and as such, the devotee should neither cling to life nor be afraid of death. He should rise above both the pleasant and the terrible, to the transcendental plane from where he can say: 'The shade of death and immortality — both these, O Mother, are Thy grace supreme!'[28] And addressing Her, the devotee says: 'Thou hast neither name nor lineage, neither birth nor death, . . . neither bondage nor freedom. Thou art the One-without-a-second, known as the Brahman supreme.'[29] Such is the highest conception of Mother in Hinduism.

The Hindu concept of Incarnation

Unlike other religions Hinduism believes in several Incarnations of God. Each one is looked upon as an Ideal for ordinary men to understand the mystery of the Godhead. A Hindu is free to accept any of these Incarnations as his spiritual Ideal through whom he tries to establish contact with the Absolute. The devotee does not see the human limitations, which the critical western scholars are eager to point out, but only divinity and divine attributes in the Incarnations. The humanity of the Incarnations is utilized in establishing intimate personal relationships with them. The human side is only a symbol of the Divine.

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[28] Swami Vivekananda, 'A Hymn to the Divine Mother', *The Complete Works*, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 500

[29] See *Universal Prayers* op. cit., verse 205.

Rāma is one of the Incarnations of Viṣṇu, and is the embodiment of devotion to truth and duty. The ordinary worshipper stresses His lovely form and noble attributes. But the illumined devotee sees Him immanent in all, and prays: 'Thou art the embodiment of the highest virtues. Thou art the indweller, the supreme Being. Thou art the greatest refuge and saviour of mankind.'[30] 'Thou art the stainless, changeless, indestructible, pure, and eternal wisdom and truth.'[31]

The Kṛṣṇa ideal in its various forms is very widespread, but is also grossly misunderstood by many. Crude-minded critics take his sport with the *gopīs* in Brindavan in a vulgar sense. But devotees like Sri Ramakrishna saw in him the highest ideal of divine Love which can be realized only by those who have become free from all traces of sensuality and crudeness. Realizing Śrī Kṛṣṇa's Universal Form manifest in all, Arjuna makes obeisance to him, saying, 'Salutations to Thee on every side, O Lord; Thou art everything, infinite in power and infinite in prowess, Thou pervadest all; Thou art all.'[32]

Thus the conception of the Personal-Impersonal, of the One in the many, permeates the entire Hindu religious consciousness — a fact that will be clearly understood by those who are able to enter into the true spirit of Hindu scriptures.

Plea for religious toleration and harmony

But it is not given to all to realize this great ideal of synthesis and acceptance. Devotees with a strongly sectarian bias very often hold that salvation lies only through the worship of their particular Deity or Incarnation, or through devotion to their formless or personal God who delivers His message to mankind only through certain prophets or teachers. But side by side with men of circumscribed vision there are liberal souls who, while they yield to none in their love and faith for their Chosen Ideal, look upon all Divine Personalities as manifestations of the same Truth: 'I make no difference in substance between Śiva, the Supreme Lord of the universe, and Viṣṇu, its inmost self. But still may my devotion be directed to Śiva.'[33]

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[30] *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa,* 6.117.14.17

[31] *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* 1.5.56

[32] *Bhagavad-Gīta* 11.40

A comparatively modern verse goes further and speaks of this underlying harmony in the clearest terms: 'Whether the Highest Being is called Viṣṇu or Śiva, Brahmā or Indra, Sun or Moon, Buddha or the perfect Mahāvīr, I always offer my salutations to Him alone who is free from attachment and hatred, from worldliness and ignorance, who is endowed with purity and compassion and is possessed of all noble attributes.'[34]

Thus the conception of unity behind diversity has been a fundamental fact in the Hindu religious consciousness all along its unbroken course, an idea that was very positively proclaimed by Manu: 'One ought to know the Supreme Spirit who is the Ruler of all, subtler than the subtlest, of resplendent glory, and capable of being realized only by meditation. Some call Him Agni (Adorable); others call Him Manu (Thinker); and others Prajāpati (Lord of creatures); some again call Him Indra (the Glorious), others Prāṇa (the Source of Life), and still others the Eternal Brahman (the Great).'[35]

Persons who cannot rise above the idea of multiplicity and limitations understand by the terms Agni etc. only the different gods. But those who can take a higher view, mean by them the different aspects or attributes of the same divine Being. Truly speaking, there have been monotheistic and monistic interpreters who have always considered the various names to be different attributes of the one and the same God. And in this respect the commentator of the *Viṣṇu-sahasranāma* has little difference with the monotheistic interpreters of the modern *Ārya-Samāj*.

Indeed, if the Personal, whatever be its name or form, be it a god or an Incarnation, be regarded as an expression of the Impersonal, then in the common worship of this Personal-Impersonal or the Impersonal-Personal Being the followers of all religions and creeds may join their hands and hearts. And special stress should be laid in modern times on the recognition of this universal aspect of the divine Being, so that it may serve as the great bond for uniting the truly religious-minded in all lands and climes, and for making them work together for the common weal in a spirit of brotherhood and fellowship, service and co-operation.

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[33] Bhartṛhari, *Vairāgya Śatakam*, 84

[34] See *Universal Prayers*, op. cit., verse 305.

[35] *Manu-Smṛti*, 12.122-23

> May He — the One-without-a-second — who, though Formless and without any purpose of His own, produces various forms by means of His manifold powers, from whom the universe comes into being in the beginning of creation, and to whom it returns in the end, endow us with good thoughts.[36]

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[36] *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad,* 4.1

CHAPTER 5

WORLDLY DUTIES AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

What is duty?

We all busy ourselves with various kinds of activities we usually call duty, and very often we find that these activities bring only restlessness and misery. If this is true, there must be something wrong with our ordinary conception of duty. We do *karma,* work, but ordinarily we do not know how to turn it into Yoga, a spiritual technique, a means for divine realization. Let us look at what Swami Vivekananda has taught about Karma-yoga.

> . . .Karma-yoga says: First destroy the tendency to project the tentacle of selfishness, and when you have the power of checking it, hold it in and do not allow the mind to get into the ways of selfishness. Then you may go out into the world and work as much as you can. Mix everywhere; go where you please; you will never be contaminated with evil. There is the lotus leaf in the water; the water cannot touch and adhere to it; so will you be in the world. This is called *vairāgya,* dispassion or non-attachment. Without non-attachment there cannot be any kind of Yoga. Non-attachment is the basis of all Yogas. The man who gives up living in the house, wearing fine clothes and eating good food, and goes into the desert may be a most attached person. His only possession, his own body, may become everything to him; and as he lives he will be simply struggling for the sake of his body. Non-attachment does not mean anything we may do in relation to our external body, it is all in the mind. The binding link of 'I' and 'mine' is in the mind. If we have not this link with the body and with the things of the senses, we are non-attached, wherever and whatever we may be. A man may be on a throne and be perfectly non-attached; another man may be in rags and still very much attached. First, we have to attain this state of non-attachment, and then work incessantly. Karma-yoga

> gives us the method that will help us in giving up all attachment. . .[1]

What then do we mean by duty? Of the two words, obligation and duty, obligation suggests an immediate constraint and a specific reference. For example, a man is under an obligation to support an aged widowed mother. Duty, on the other hand, usually implies less compulsion from immediate circumstances, but a greater impulsion on moral or ethical grounds. The English poet Wordsworth calls duty the 'stern daughter of the voice of God'. We all know how sometimes we are torn asunder between duty and self-interest. Whatever we call it, for us unillumined souls duty implies a degree of restraint or compulsion.

The case of illumined souls is different. Śrī Kṛṣṇa, a Divine Incarnation, tells us in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 'I have no duty; there is nothing in all the worlds that I have not gained and nothing that I have to gain, yet I continue to work.'[2] Divine Incarnations and illumined souls work in a spirit of freedom, out of their love for the suffering mankind. In the Godman there is no conflict of desires and consequently no conflict of duties. He has only one way of doing a thing and that is the Godward way. Owing to ignorance, we are often confused about the nature of duty and also about the way of meeting it.

Duty and selfishness

How pointedly does Swami Vivekananda tell us that our so-called sense of duty often becomes a disease!

> Duty becomes a disease with us; it drags us ever forward. It catches hold of us and makes our whole life miserable. It is the bane of human life. This duty, this idea of duty, is the midday summer sun which scorches the innermost soul of mankind. Look at those poor slaves to duty! Duty leaves them no time to say prayers, no time to bathe. Duty is ever on them. They go out and work. Duty is on them! They come home and think

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[1] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972) Vol. I, pp. 101-102

[2] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 3.22

> of the work for the next day. Duty is on them! It is living a slave's life, at last dropping down in the street and dying in harness, like a horse. This is duty as it is understood. The only true duty is to be unattached and to work as free beings, to give up all work unto God.[3]

We become slaves of duty and make our whole life miserable. We must gain a better understanding of where our duty lies and how to perform it. How often we find that before we have learned to solve our own problems we work to help others, not out of love but for the sake of self-gratification! There certainly are selfless souls eager to serve others, but in this strange world, which one of our older Swamis once named 'God's great lunatic asylum', there are many busybodies who, because they are frustrated in life, or do not care to take up the humdrum tasks close at hand, go about inflicting themselves on others to satisfy their own vanity. 'They need my loving service', the egocentric ones declare. We human beings are so full of self-love that we cannot imagine that others may dislike us just as much as we dislike them. A psychologist once said this to a group of girls who were very much surprised by what they heard, for self-love does not easily admit the thought that one may heartily be disliked.

There is another type of self-centred persons who seem to be over-anxious to make others happy and have no time for prayer or meditation. They are bent on saving the world by joining clubs or bridge parties, societies, dinners, or political committees that give them some self-importance for a while, but when the novelty wears off or there is a lull in chatter or activity, they at once feel miserable and dissatisfied. Without mincing words Swami Vivekananda says:

> How easy it is to interpret slavery as duty–the morbid attachment of flesh for flesh as duty! Men go out into the world and struggle and fight for money or for any other thing to which they get attached. Ask them why they do it. They say, 'It is a duty.' It is the absurd greed for gold and gain, and they try to cover it with a few flowers.[4]

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[3] *The Complete Works,* op. cit., Vol. I, p. 103

[4] ibid.

By covering selfishness with flowers we cannot perform any real duty in a spirit of detachment and make it a part of an integrated spiritual life. Self-centred 'duty' may bring us many problems and create new bondage.

Several faces of the ego

Human beings are strange combinations of various elements. According to William James, most persons have as many different social-selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion they care. We have dual, even multiple personalities. We are one 'self' in business, another in church, still another at home. We hesitate to do in public what we gladly do in private life. Our many selves are sometimes quite incompatible with one another and so create endless confusion for us. There is the story of a grocer who had always done business on Sundays until he and his family attended a revival meeting and became converted. The following Sunday, when a neighbour's child knocked at the door for her milk, the grocer's little daughter leaned from an upper window and said: 'Didn't you know we all got converted last week? After this, if you want to buy milk on Sundays, you'll have to go round to the back door.'

But it is not only simple folk who deceive themselves in this way. Even highly-placed persons often live double lives. The story is told of a certain Elector of Cologne in Germany who was also an Archbishop. One day he used profane words in the presence of a farmer who could not conceal his astonishment. Trying to justify himself he said, 'My good man, I am swearing not as an Archbishop, but as a prince.' For which the intelligent farmer replied: 'But, Your Highness, when the prince goes to hell what will become of the Archbishop?'

We all must remember that if we separate private and public lives and follow opposite codes of conduct we cannot help paying a very heavy penalty in the form of restlessness and double bondage. We certainly create a hell in our own lives and lay a train of evil consequences.

There are false duties as there are real duties. In life it is not always easy to determine which action is right and which is wrong. According to law it is wrong to kill anybody during times of peace, but in times of war it becomes the duty of every man, especially when he joins the army, to kill as many enemies as possible. According to Hindu religion it is wrong to kill a cow because the cow has become an emblem of motherhood, but for a Muslim it is meritorious to slaughter a cow in the celebration of certain festivals. Again, while the Hindu has always practised *ahiṁsā* or non-injury as a duty, the Muslims were formerly praised for killing the 'infidels', and during the Middle Ages, Christian inquisitors considered it their duty to burn heretics at the stake in order to save Mother Church. Thus there are duties and duties. As Swami Vivekananda declares:

> To give an objective definition of duty is entirely impossible. Yet there is duty from the subjective side. Any action that makes us go Godward is a good action and is our duty; any action that makes us go downward is evil and is not our duty.[5]

According to the great Hindu philosopher Rāmānuja, good is that which leads to expansion of the soul and evil is that which makes the soul contract.

The concept of duty in Hinduism — Varṇaśrama Dharma

Hindu religion institutes four orders of society, each with a definite set of duties: the spiritual man, the warrior, the trader and the labourer. There are also special obligations for each of these according to their stages of growth, viz. those of the student, the householder, the man retired from active life, and the monk. In ancient Hindu culture all these ways of life were distinct and sharply defined. But in modern times western socio-political ideas and technology have changed all this. Now there is confusion of rights and duties, and an ever-increasing number of individuals who do not know where they belong to or what they should do. According to Hindu teaching, each man has his *dharma* or the righteousness that will put him on the path of God. *Dharma* is the all-comprehensive law of being which serves to integrate the entire life of man with the deep cosmic rhythm expressing itself through the individual and society as a whole. There is a unity of spirit with infinite manifestations.

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[5] ibid., p. 64

The great lesson of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and other scriptures is that the individual as a part of a community is also a part of an indivisible cosmic whole. In ancient Hindu scriptures there is the symbol of a mighty Being from whose mouth issues the Brahmin, the spiritual man with his passions under control and possessing knowledge, uprightness and purity; from His arm, the warrior; from His loins, the trader and farmer whose duty is to provide food and means of human living; from His feet, the labourer who performs the hard work of the world.[6] All orders of society are indispensable parts of the whole, like the parts of the human body. After the completion of the stages of the student and the householder, there is time for the life of retirement, and perhaps further for the life of the anchorite meditating in solitude, free from all attachments.

If every individual, in all stages of his life, is integrated with the underlying cosmic rhythm, he will promote not only his own welfare but also that of all around him. That is the highest duty for each one of us. The cosmic Being is often represented with multiple hands and feet to remind us of the many manifestations of the Absolute unity. Each man is an actor on the world stage and must learn to play his own part as well as he can. No two of us have the same part to play.

The American Declaration of Independence states, 'All men are created equal.' Now we all know that no two persons are alike either in outer or inner life. How then can they be equal? Vedānta replies: the same spirit dwells in all, but so far as mental and physical capacities, and tendencies are concerned, men are not equal and differ greatly from one another. There is sameness and equality at the spiritual plane but infinite variety at all other planes.

The great scholar and philanthropist Ishvar Chandra Vidyasagar once asked Sri Ramakrishna: 'Has God endowed some with more power and others with less?' The Master replied:

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[6] 'Puruṣa Sūktaṁ', *Ṛg-Veda,* 10.90.12

> As the all-pervading Spirit He exists in all things, even in the ant. But the manifestations of His power are different in different beings; otherwise, how can one person put ten to flight, while another can't face even one? And why do all people respect you? Have you grown a pair of horns? You have more compassion and learning. Therefore people honour you and come to pay you their respects.[7]

The Hindu view teaches each man to take things as they are, find out his own capacity, discover the truth of his own being, and then follow his law of growth, his *svadharma*. He will then be clear about his duty to himself and to society. A certain young householder came to Sri Ramakrishna and said that he had decided to renounce the world and become a *sannyāsin*. The Master advised him to return to his family. 'Oh, my father-in-law can maintain them', the would-be monk replied. 'Have you no sense of honour?', Sri Ramakrishna asked him. After scolding him, he asked the young man to find a job and maintain his family.[8] There is *dharma* for each individual, for every stage of ordinary life, and even the most work-a-day life partakes of the cosmic rhythm. By fulfilling the duties of life in the proper way every man may attain spiritual progress. There is no question of superiority or inferiority of work, or of station in life. Everybody must strive for spiritual perfection. This is the central message of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and is clearly stated in the verse,

> Man attains the highest spiritual perfection by worshipping through his work the Lord from whom all work proceeds and who permeates all beings.[9]

There are two paths before us: first, the path of legitimate worldly achievement and enjoyment. If properly regulated, this culminates naturally in the second path, namely the path of divine realization and freedom from all bondage. One may choose either of these according to one's capacity. The path to avoid at all costs is that of *adharma*, or unrighteousness, which is fraught with passion, falsehood and greed. If material prosperity results from activity in the world, it should be shared with others and should be utilized for the promotion of the spiritual welfare of oneself as well as that of others.

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[7] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 31

[8] ibid., p. 3

[9] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 18.46

Duties of the householder

In the Hindu scheme of social life the householder is looked upon as the mainstay of society. It is necessary that children should be taught to contribute to the general welfare and security of the society. It is written in the *Manu-Smṛti*: 'Just as all living beings depend upon air for their existence, so also people belonging to other stages of life depend on the householder for their sustenance.'[10]

However, the householder's life is not considered to be one given to sense pleasures. In Śrī Kṛṣṇa's advice to his disciple Uddhava this point is stressed again and again.

> Always the householder must remember that the ideal good lies not in enjoyment but in the attainment of knowledge as the individual life becomes part of the cosmic whole. A devotee, having worshipped the divine Spirit through the household duties, may retire into the forest to devote himself entirely to spiritual disciplines and purify his heart. [11]

According to the Hindu scriptures the householder has five kinds of duties to discharge. These are: 1. Worship of gods, 2. Study of the scriptures (duty to the ancient sages), 3. Helping fellow beings, 4. Offering oblation to ancestors and 5. Protecting animals. These duties are called *pañca-mahā-yajña* (the great fivefold sacrifice).[12] And all these duties are to be performed not as a drudgery but in a spirit of service, in a spirit of worship. When one discharges one's duties in this spirit they do not lead to bondage. On the contrary, they help one in spiritual life. Vedānta aims at integrating duty, service and worship. If an activity cannot be linked with our spiritual life it is not to be called duty. If you find that a particular work is dragging you away from God, do not do it. All kinds of work must take us nearer and nearer to God. As Śrī Kṛṣṇa tells Uddhava in the *Bhāgavatam:*

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[10] यथा वायुं समाश्रित्य सर्वे जीवन्ति जन्तवः ।
तथा गृहस्थमाश्रित्य वर्तन्ते सर्व आश्रमाः ॥
Manu-Smṛti, 3.77

[11] See *Bhāgavatam*, 11. 17.52,55.

[12] *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.4.16 and *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 1.7.2.6

> He who worships Me constantly and steadfastly through the performance of his duty, knowing Me as the supreme Goal, such a one becomes endowed with knowledge and realization and soon attains to My Being. All duties, if accompanied by devotion to Me, lead to liberation. This is the way to blessedness.[13]

Man's duty to himself

Over and above the five kinds of duties mentioned above, every man has a duty to himself — to his higher Self. Since every soul is part of the Universal Soul, when a man discharges his duty to his higher Self, he fulfils all other obligations. The higher Self of man is waiting for its manifestation, its unfoldment. But it is constantly being eclipsed by his lower self or ego. In the din and bustle of day-to-day life, in the head-long rush towards sense enjoyment, man neglects the 'still small voice' within him, the cry of his soul. As a result, whatever he does becomes in the end a source of dissatisfaction and frustration for him. Even the so-called service of fellow beings leaves him weary and discontented. All our duties must have the unfoldment of the higher Self as their integral aim. Then alone will life appear meaningful.

The main problem is that people want to become teachers without undergoing a strict course of *sādhanā*, without becoming pure instruments in the hands of the Lord. He lives in the temple of the human body. We should first come to know the Lord ourselves and be able to solve our own problems, and then help others. By our very being we can help others silently, by radiating Truth, without their being aware of it. But without having attained any spiritual experience ourselves, it is quite absurd to think or talk about helping others spiritually. Once you have developed real purity and non-attachment, you no longer get mixed up with the world, and the world no longer acts on your mind and nerves. And then alone can you talk about helping others, realizing that you are only an instrument in the hands of the Lord.

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[13] *Bhāgavatam,* 11.18.44,47

There is another thing that should be considered as our duty. A little of the student's life has to be continued even after our school days. If there comes any break in our studies and serious readings, it is very bad for the development of our mind and thinking faculty. Many people lose their thinking habit, when they leave school or grow older. And this is very bad indeed. There is nothing so dangerous as loose, hazy thinking. Having lost their thinking habit, they become only men of action and not men of thought. Both should be combined and harmonized, otherwise the effects will be very bad. For most people it becomes impossible to take up their studies again after there has been a break, and the very few who succeed in doing so must pass through a period of terrible strain and struggle, because the thinking habit has been lost. Their shallow superficial readings, their light talk, their thoughtless outward activities have spoilt their thinking faculty to a great extent. If you open your eyes, you will see the effects of this in our present-day world: thoughtless, hectic activity without any higher ideal or deeper understanding of truth and the higher laws; activity for the sake of activity which is not much better than idleness for the sake of idleness, however much people may pride themselves on that kind of active life. It is not enough that I go on creating something. What I create must be something good, constructive, not destructive or tending to degrade humanity.

So even if we do not find time to read much, intense thinking must be made a matter of daily practice. So much time is continually being wasted in thinking useless and even harmful thoughts, which might be made use of for thinking along higher constructive lines. There are so many dull moments in the course of the day, and these dull moments can very well be used for higher thinking. Instead of thinking useless thoughts, let us make use of that time for something higher.

Instead of sitting in some corner and being dull, we can make use of such moments by thinking of something higher and truer. If we really do this we shall find that there is plenty of time for our practices, our studies, our intelligent thinking. Our thoughts should never be allowed to drift aimlessly.

Very often we go and sit in a more or less thoughtless manner for half an hour or so, or read some light stuff or listen to something light and worthless. All this we do more or less like idiots. We even find it pleasant. But the moment this half an hour is to be used for devotional readings or serious studies, for something profitable and healthy, our whole brain revolts and resists.

One can ponder profitably over the well-known saying of the Buddha, 'Come now, brethren. I do remind ye: Subject to decay are all compounded things. Do ye abide in heedfulness.' This advice helps us very greatly in avoiding useless occupations and random thinking by making us realize the evanescence of the phenomenon. We should make it a point to stress the unchanging Principle in our life and not that which is continually changing and transforming itself in countless ways. And the highest duty of man is to realize that Principle here, in this very life, and then to help others in realizing it.

If we consciously utilize the time that is being lost in idle talk, in useless occupations and thoughts, we should find more time than we need. Through practice we can develop such intensive thinking that two hours' ordinary thinking may be done in half an hour. There are two things, quantity and quality. If you cannot increase the quantity, then improve the quality — the quality of your meditation, studies, etc.

It is advisable for everybody not only to find time for his prayers, *japa* and meditation, but also to have some regular studies, some readings of selected passages from the Upaniṣads, for at least ten minutes after his spiritual practice. Inertia and dullness are two great enemies of spiritual life in all its phases. And there are many people who develop physical and mental inertia which is very very dangerous. When we allow this mood of inertia to possess us, we do not find any time either for our practices or for readings and studies. In such a mood we do not 'see' the time, though the time may be there; we become too dull to be aware of it.

Sense control helps us in thinking intensely and in living intensely and purposefully. Why always go and dwell in the sense world? When the senses are controlled, one can easily remain on the thought plane. Why go and get kicks and blows from the outside world? When distractions are removed, we will be able to lead a more intensive and conscious life, and remain as wide-awake as possible under all circumstances. But very often we find that people become more and more dull and inert like stocks and stones, finding less and less time for their studies and spiritual practice, as soon as the goad of outward distractions and worldly pursuits have been removed.

Duty and attachment

We may do our work 1. out of attachment to people and objects, 2. out of a sense of duty, or 3. out of devotion to the supreme Spirit dwelling in all beings. Very often the first two get mixed up. Most people are unable to separate the true sense of duty from attachment. Duty then becomes a justification for our attachments. This is why one thinker has put it: 'Duty is the penalty we have to pay for our attachment.' At first sight, this may seem a very curious and unsatisfactory definition, but it must be understood from a certain higher standpoint. The Buddhas, Christs, Ramakrishnas, etc. have no duty at all. In their case there is only loving service and no duty. There is no constraint in their activities. Neither is there any wish for gain, nor any for the fruits of their work. The perfect man has no duty and no attachment. There is nothing he has to perform as duty.[14] His is only loving service done in perfect freedom without any sense of constraint or the thought of 'I' and 'mine'.

Duty does not consist in attachment or clinging to this little world of our ego, to our body consciousness, to our mind, etc. and I am not prepared to call any work done through attachment or for the satisfaction of some desires, whatever its nature may be, duty or to give it the place of duty. Such work is attachment and clinging to our little personalities, but never the fruit of a higher sense of duty and freedom.

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[14] . . . तस्य कार्यं न विद्यते ॥
Bhagavad-Gītā, 3.17

True duty consists in the control of the senses, in selflessness, in loving service, in the purification and the right concentration of the mind, and in giving all our faculties a higher turn making them fit instruments for the Divine. The purer we become, the better can we do our work as a form of loving service to the Divine in all, but we should see that there is no attachment in it. Attachment should never be given the name of duty, whatever else it may be. Most people perform their so-called duty out of clinging to sensual pleasures in a gross or subtle form, out of attachment to persons or things, but this is not duty. Here we should learn to discriminate very clearly between what is really deep-rooted egotism in some form or other, and what is duty in the true sense of the term.

So long as we are not prepared to renounce our inordinate clinging to our little self and its petty desires, our inordinate hankering for all sorts of sense pleasures and possessions, we can never take a higher standpoint, and so we cannot understand the meaning of the definition, 'Duty is the penalty we have to pay for our attachment.' Really speaking, duty is that which helps our spiritual progress. This should be taken as a general rule for everybody. The discharging of our various duties — fulfilling our bodily needs, or helping others, or serving the Lord — should enable us to attain spiritual progress. If we do not make spiritual progress, then there must be something wrong with our attitude towards work or our sense of duty.

There are also people who cultivate an indifferent mood. They are indifferent to everything except perhaps their own personal affairs. Very often this indifference is the result of selfishness and laziness. It is a Tāmasic state and should not be confused with the true detachment of a spiritual man. Such lethargic and dull people are more dead than alive. True detachment, a true witness attitude, makes you alert, and imparts intensity to everything you set your mind on — work or meditation.

Conflict of duties

Very often we think we have got a certain duty to perform, but we find that it is beyond our grasp. It is too high for us. What should be done in such a case? Take the help of a working duty and make that a stepping-stone on the way to the goal. There is no such thing as a fixed standard for duty. Duty changes continually in the course of our evolution. The child's duty is not that of the youth. The youth's duty is not that of the old man. The householder's duty is not that of the monk. So each case has to be judged differently.

Very often our sense of duty is found to be in conflict with our sense of the pleasant, but we should learn to make our sense of duty coincide with our sense of the pleasant, make our thought coincide with what we should like to do, and thus avoid unnecessary friction and worry which mean a huge waste of energy.

Sometimes we complain that we are not able to get time for spiritual practice because of our preoccupation with the duties of life. Usually, such complaints are baseless. If there is any real, sincere, and deep-rooted hankering after the higher life, you will always find the necessary time for your spiritual practice and studies. And if you do not do so in spite of feeling a real yearning, you will end by being completely upset. When the soul has come to have a little awakening it must be given food under all circumstances. Otherwise, there comes a serious cleavage in the personality, a great disturbance and restlessness, a tremendous dissatisfaction and loss of balance. In such a case you never feel at ease so long as you go on starving your soul.

Some day we may have to go through our practices a little hurriedly, some other day at greater leisure and with greater attention, but if we do not go through them at all, this thought will be pricking us constantly for the rest of the day, creating a whirlpool in our mind. Whether hurriedly or leisurely, spiritual practice has to be done day by day with great steadiness, singleness of purpose and regularity.

Saying that there is absolutely no time for one's spiritual practice and reading is not the truth. If I find time to sleep for six hours, I can sleep, let us say, just ten minutes less, and take some five minutes from my meals, some five minutes from something else, and so on. Thus I come to have at least half an hour for my spiritual practice and readings. And this is what is to be done under all circumstances, even if the mind is disturbed, even if I am not able to do it with great attention, even if I go through my practice somewhat mechanically, even if my whole brain revolts at the mere idea of study or deep thinking. And this too is duty. For by serving myself first with a view to serving others, I can serve them with far greater efficiency and in a better spirit. If we are able to work for others in the right spirit without any personal gain, we will be able to do our meditation in a better way and that, again, will help us in working for others in a better spirit of consecration and self-surrender to the Divine.

There are some people who go on with their *japa* even while they are engaged in some work. The mind has got wonderful capacities if we only know how to control, purify, and develop it along right lines. One may very well do one's work in a perfectly resigned way surrendering oneself wholly and unconditionally to the Divine. Then there comes a time when all work becomes worship. And work again becomes worship when we are in that prayerful mood of self-surrender. It is possible to combine both activity and self-surrender, and do what we have got to do in perfect self-forgetfulness.

Work must have a higher goal

In the lives of most people you find it is all aimless activity that has no ideal, no higher goal, no clear conception of anything. It is nothing but drifting in a sea of vague and nebulous ideas and desires. What such people generally go on calling duty is, really speaking, nothing else but attachment. Most people keep themselves busy and active through attachment and yearning for sense enjoyment. It is always easy to be active when following the line of attachment and clinging to wrong values. And very often through attachment, through covetousness in some form or other, we call a thing our duty. But it is not duty at all. It is all attachment and craving for sense enjoyment, though we give it a high-sounding name and feel satisfied. Duty as such should have no element of attachment or egotism in it, whether individual or collective. We should work in a spirit of perfect self-sacrifice to the Divine, through a sense of 'ought', never for some personal end.

Ordinarily, people work as slaves to their senses and personal desires, gross and subtle. But the Great Ones work out of their own immeasurable freedom, neither from a sense of attachment nor from a sense of duty as generally understood. They do all their acts as a form of loving service to the Divine in all, fully realizing themselves to be instruments in the hands of the Lord.

Our activities should have a goal that is beyond the realm of our petty desires, and this goal must be realized. Our activities should never be aimless ones, activity for the sake of activity. There are many people who pride themselves on being 'active', but that simply means they cannot sit still, they must always 'do' something, being afraid of being left to themselves and to their own thoughts. Theirs is the random activity of a monkey that is intensely active, no doubt, but for what, nobody knows. This is nothing to feel proud of. Such people always do something or see something or hear something on the physical plane, and if they are prevented from doing this, they feel miserable. They are no longer able to live on the thought plane. Most people work only through attachment and clinging to their body for what Sri Ramakrishna used to call 'kāma-kāñcana' ('lust and gold'). If there comes a sense of real duty in a person, that will be something better, but even that is still a sort of constraint. There is still something higher and better than that: loving service to the Divine in all, in perfect self-surrender.

The higher ideal, of course, always brings in its wake a certain amount of limitation. I can no longer freely and thoughtlessly go in for all kinds of so-called duties, all kinds of activities, the moment I have the higher ideal in view. I cannot steal, I cannot tell lies. I cannot do anything immoral. I cannot lead a sexually impure life. I cannot act in an undignified, vulgar way. At least, the really sincere and scrupulous person cannot. The unscrupulous person can do all that and much more. So, here again, the scrupulous person is more limited than the unscrupulous one, but this kind of limitation belongs to a higher order. If we sincerely bring in the higher ideal, we will find that certain activities and certain so-called duties do not tally with it. And all these have to be thrown overboard. There is no other way.

When we make some compromise we should say and know that we are weak, but we should never make that a justification for our weakness or even go so far as to call it a duty. And if any compromise is made, it should only be made with a view to rising above all compromise some day. There should be no attempt at justification. The ideal should never be lowered.

The question of duty is a very difficult one. So in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* it is said that even the wise are confused as to what is duty and what is non-duty.[15] As defined earlier, duty is that which helps us in our progress; non-duty, that which prevents or retards our progress — just as we can say: good is that which helps our evolution; evil is that which retards or prevents our evolution. But all these are only very loose and general definitions. Each case should be judged by its own merit. And always the lesser thing has to be sacrificed for the sake of the greater, the lower self has to be sacrificed for the sake of the higher Self. By doing this we rise step by step to higher and higher forms of duty till we reach the goal when all duty drops off, and what is left is only loving service to the Divine in all in a spirit of perfect self-surrender and self-forgetfulness. And this is the ideal all the Great Ones stand for.

Helping others spiritually

After progressing in spiritual life you should try to render spiritual help to others. But do this only to the extent you have already got the power. Otherwise, pray to the Lord for those whom you want to help. If you pray intensely and sincerely, the Lord will do what is best for them. You can help others to the extent they are in tune with the Lord, your own *Iṣṭa Devatā*.

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[15] *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4.16

You cannot help others effectively if you cannot help yourself. If the boat in which you travel capsized, you might be able to save one of your companions, provided you yourself were a strong swimmer. But you would not be able to save all of them and, should you attempt it, all would be drowned including yourself. So, gauge your own strength first, dispassionately, using discrimination. Then try to help others if an opportunity arises.

Śiva drank the terrible poison so that the whole world might be saved. He had the power to assimilate the poison without being poisoned. You must first attain the tremendous purity of Śiva if you want to remove the poison of the world. Better begin with small doses! As you grow purer and spiritually stronger you will be able to absorb bigger doses without much danger to yourself. The more you feel for others and wish to help them, the more should you become unattached and move closer to your *Iṣṭa Devatā*, the Lord. Pray for yourself and for others.

Learn to be a real child of the Lord, no matter what happens, and pray to Him to give you unwavering faith in Him and in yourself. Make the Lord your all in all. Then nothing will affect you. You will be safe at all times, wherever you are, if you maintain contact with the divine Consciousness in you. Be pure, one-pointed, determined, and you are sure to attain the goal.

CHAPTER 6

CONDITIONS OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

Faith in the Ideal

Even before the dawn of the highest realization, we can have a very clear and strong faith in the Divine because this idea is in the very depths of our being. The first condition of spiritual life is the awakening of this faith in us. Our soul is a reflection of the Divine, and this reflection proves the existence of the Light even when we are not able to see the Light directly. The reason why we want to live eternally is that our real nature is eternal. The body, the mind or the senses can never be eternal as they are ever changing. As separate from all these, there is in us the 'I'-consciousness which does not change. When we try to think of a soul or spiritual consciousness that somehow or other gets mixed up with our thoughts and our physical consciousness, we are actually making an enquiry into the nature of the ultimate Reality.

Unless we have attained the fullest realization, we have to go on with some idea or conception of the ultimate Reality. But in every case our faith, our belief, has to be verified. If belief is based on reality, it will be vitalized. If belief or faith is not based on reality, it will go on for some time and then perish.

The goal of life is freedom — freedom from fear, from suffering, from the toils and struggles of repeated birth and death — and the attainment of supreme Peace. And the means of attaining these is Self-knowledge. That is what thousands of sages in India have for ages proclaimed. The first condition for spiritual life is *śraddhā* or faith in the spiritual ideal, that is, the ideal of Self-realization. This ideal must be fixed and be clear before beginning one's *sādhanā*. We must have a very definite idea of the path and a definite idea of the goal to be attained, i.e. the goal of life. So long as we allow ourselves to be vague and dreamy and hazy in all our feelings and doings, there will be a continual conflict in us which will prevent most of us from advancing even a single step towards the goal. There is too much superficial thinking, shallow feeling, indefinite willing and acting, without any really intense aspiration or clear-cut purpose or deep awareness.

There is an instructive anecdote in Zen Buddhist literature:

> A monk asked a Zen master: 'I understand that when a lion seizes his prey, whether a hare or an elephant, he puts forth all his powers in one concentrated effort. What is the nature of this power?' The master replied: 'The spirit of complete sincerity. The power of not deceiving.' (The cryptic answer is further elaborated as follows:) 'Not deceiving means putting forth one's whole being. This is known as the whole being in action — nothing kept in reserve or expressed under a disguise, nothing going to waste. When a man lives like this, he is said to be a golden-maned lion, the symbol of virility, sincerity, wholeheartedness.'

In other words, what is needed in spiritual life is *śraddhā,* faith in one's ability to realize the true Self. This faith releases all the pent-up energy in the right direction.

Doubt is a very great danger and can obstruct all progress in spiritual life. It comes to all beginners at sometime or other. Doubt means lack of faith in oneself and in the divine Being, and it cannot be dispelled completely until the realization of the Divine is attained. However, we should never allow ourselves to be overpowered by doubt, nor must we waver in our determination to progress in spiritual life.

We should have the ideal fixed in our minds that neither worldly nor heavenly pleasures is our goal; our only goal should be Self-realization. Heavenly enjoyment is no better than earthly enjoyment, and so long as there is in us hankering after heavenly enjoyment we can never attain the goal. Heaven is a very cheap thing after all.

There is a story about going to heaven. A man who was a great golf enthusiast died and went to heaven. The first question he asked on reaching heaven was, 'Have you got a golf course here?' 'Golf course in heaven!', came the reply, 'It never happens!' 'Then I don't want heaven. I will rather go to the *other place.*' So he was guided to the *other place.* As he entered it, his guide pointed out wonderful golf links. He then asked, 'But, my dear fellow, where are the golf clubs?' His guide replied, 'Well, we have only got the golf course, we don't have the clubs, and that is the *hell* of it.'

We cannot lead an out-and-out worldly life and the higher life at the same time. We cannot allow ourselves to run after worldly love and affections and have the higher divine Love at the same time. God and worldly affections, God and worldly passions and pleasure, cannot live together. As the great saint Tulsīdās said, 'Where *kāma* (lust) is, there Rāma cannot be; where Rāma is, there *kāma* cannot be.' As Jesus Christ said, 'Ye cannot serve God and mammon.'[1]

We should closely examine ourselves and find out whether we really want God. If we desire the love and affection of other persons, or the things of the world, we can do without Him. And if we feel quite happy and satisfied when these are granted to us, it is a sure sign that we do not want God. In such a case, we only deserve it if we do not get Him. So every aspirant should ask himself now and then whether it is really God that he wants or something else. And if it is really God, he can be sure that He will come to him, for God always comes to the devotee who really seeks Him alone. Says Sri Ramakrishna — 'If the devotee moves towards God one step, He comes towards him ten steps.'[2]

Our whole trouble is that we believe this phenomenal world with all the people we see in it to be intensely real, and two realities cannot have room in us. So, first of all, a void is to be created in the heart of every aspirant, and once this is done, he can fill this void with the Divine.

Whatever we take to be real, whatever we think to be true and permanent, draws our whole being, absorbs our whole mind, attracts our whole feeling. This is an important law in spiritual life. And according to Vedānta nothing is ultimately real which does not remain unchanged under all circumstances. Real is that alone which was in the past, is in the present and will be in the future without undergoing any change. Everything that changes or decays, undergoes evolution or involution, belongs to the category of the unreal. A little boy was asked by his mother: 'What is a dream?' The boy answered, 'It's like watching a movie with closed eyes.' We can experience the waking state too in the same way, provided we have the boy's purity and inner simplicity. When we analyze ourselves we find that consciousness alone remains unchanged. Pure Consciousness is like a screen on which the passing show of this world is projected.

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[1] *Bible*, St. Matthew, 6:24

[2] Quoted by Swami Abhedananda, *Thoughts on Yoga, Upaniṣads and Gītā* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1970), p. 74.

Swami Vivekananda said: 'God alone lives. The soul alone lives. Spirituality alone lives. Hold on to that.'[3] We must have firm faith in the truth of this statement.

We should never try to lower a high ideal, but should rather always struggle to measure ourselves up to the ideal. If the ideal is too high, we must have a working ideal as a stepping-stone to reach the high ideal which we know is the goal of our life. Until we attain the highest ideal, viz. the realization of the Infinite, we should not compromise. If we fail in our attempt to reach this high ideal let us know we have only failed. We should continue with greater vigour and determination to reach the ideal. We should not run after low ideals.

Separating the essentials of religion from the non-essentials

The second qualification absolutely essential to the spiritual aspirant is the ability to separate the essential part of religion from the non-essentials. People who mistake the non-essentials of religion for true spiritual life, and get lost in its rigmarole, never make any spiritual progress. This is the fate of the so-called orthodox people who, in spite of all their strict observance of religious codes, remain where they are. They have just missed the mark.

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[3] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1964), Vol. III, p. 149

Religion is something different from and much more than book knowledge. Nowadays books are available everywhere, books on all religions bringing the message of different religions in different forms. But through mere scholarship, through mere intellectual study, you can never know the Truth. When we think too much and highly of intellectual life, we can never realize the essential truth of religion that 'He is one; sages call Him by different names.'[4]

> Let the aspirant study as best he can, master the subjects, but after having become a great scholar, let him renounce desires and try to live upon the strength which comes from knowledge.[5]

Unless we become simple there can never be any spiritual life. We must be free from all guile, from all falsehood, from all secrecy, all lack of uprightness, from all perversities of the mind, if we want to make any progress. A spiritual aspirant must be upright, perfectly sincere, frank, and be a man of meditation. He must be free from conceit, the vanity of scholarship. Having known the essentials of spiritual life, having formed a clear conception of the Divine, he should try to practise the disciplines. One should not read too many empty words. That only creates disturbance and trouble.

> The mass of words in the scriptures is like a dense forest tending to confuse the mind. Hence the wise man should struggle to know the true nature of the Self.
>
> Scholarship, oratory, skill in expounding the scriputres, and erudition give pleasure to a scholar but they do not give liberation.[6]

Now, this does not mean that you should not go in for studies. What is meant is that you should study with a view to realizing the Truth. You know Sri Ramakrishna's story about the man who received a letter from home informing him that certain presents were to be sent to his relatives. After knowing the contents, the man threw away the letter and then went and bought the things.[7] Study is always encouraged in Vedānta, but along with your studies there must be some real spiritual practice. You must always train your intellect through regular studies and deep thinking on the problems of life and Reality. Read books in a systematic way and form a habit of clear and deep thinking so that you would feel uncomfortable if on any day you have not studied some book deeply. This daily study is to be made an important item of your *sādhanā* (spiritual practice).

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[4] *Ṛg-Veda,* 1.164.46 (See chap. 4, footnote 16)

[5] *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad,* 3.5.1, and Śaṁkara's commentary on it

[6] *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi,* verses 60, 58

It was the mission of Buddha's life to ask people not to think too much of rites and ceremonies, but to make religion living in their own lives by leading a life of purity, meditation, spiritual discipline and mental control. Without being moral and leading a pure life we can never expect to become spiritual or make any progress. All this then remains nothing but a fond dream.

What did Buddha say of God? He did not speak anything of God. It is not essential to speak of God so much, but it is far more essential to follow God's path, to live the spiritual life. People very often say, 'Lord, how beautiful Thou art! How beautiful art Thy skies, Thy stars, this whole creation!' But they forget that the Creator is always greater than His creation and He does not feel proud of such a small thing. Seen from our human standpoint we find it great but to God it is a very small thing after all. So it is more important to follow God's path than to praise God for His external splendour. This praise often becomes lip service.

Once Buddha was asked, 'Sir, is there a God?' 'Did I say that there is a God?' The questioner concluded, 'So there is no God.' But Buddha countered, 'Did I say there is no God?'[8] Buddha wanted to stop all empty and hair-splitting speculations, and make people do something to free themselves from sorrow and pain. So he said, 'When a house is on fire, do you just go and trace the origin of the fire or do you try to extinguish it?' But we in our foolishness very often try to trace the origin first, and before we succeed in the attempt, the whole house is burnt down, and nothing but a heap of ashes remains. We must learn to separate the essentials of religion from the non-essentials.

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[7] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 704

[8] Adapted from F.L. Woodward, *Some Sayings of the Buddha* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 223

Self-effort

This means effort, the struggle to go beyond the thought world we have been building up for years. Most of the people are unwilling to abandon it. They are too lethargic to work against their own mind. Sri Ramakrishna once complained to the Divine Mother that he had cooked the food and kept it before the people, but still they did not even take the trouble of eating it.[9] We always want everything to be done for us by somebody else. There can be no vicarious salvation without any self-effort on the part of the aspirant. Most of the so-called religious people are mere parasites in the world of religion and spiritual life. It would be better for them to take up something else.

Before we actually begin our spiritual life in real earnest, we must decide if we are really and fully prepared to pay the price for it. Generally there are two tendencies, the worldly tendency and the spiritual tendency, in us. If both are more or less equally strong in the beginning, the spiritual tendency must be strengthened; otherwise there will be no progress, and the tug-of-war going on in ourselves can never be overcome. That is why it is absolutely necessary for us to fix once for all our ideal, and then stick to it, whatever happens. If we really wish to follow the difficult path beset with so many pitfalls and dangers, we must also be prepared to overcome all the difficulties. If we wish to transcend all the unrealities, there must always be a certain amount of the fearlessness and heroism of the dare-devil in us. The path of the aspirant is a very dangerous one; dangers and pitfalls are lurking everywhere, on all sides; and if once caught, there is no more chance for many people. Unless you sacrifice all your worldly desires and your sense of 'I'-ness, you can never realize the higher ideal.

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[9] See *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1975), p. 206.

We are just like cows tied to a post with a very long rope. The cows could graze and have a certain amount of freedom in their movements. But the silly animals just go round and round till the whole rope has become wound up and makes it impossible for them even to reach the grass at their feet. God gives a very long rope to man, but only in rare cases does man make proper use of the rope. Mostly he entangles himself hopelessly in it, till he can scarcely move one way or other. That is not God's fault, though. Learn to take the whole responsibility on your own shoulders. It is a great mistake to hold God responsible for all that happens to you. You forget everything else for a moment's pleasure and do not care to listen to what God has been telling man through the ages.

Spiritual life, if it means sublimation and purification of our feelings, means at the same time developing our will power and forcing the mind to take to the higher path. This must be wholly directed towards the higher life. We find in the world tremendous will power and concentration, but both are given a wrong direction and thus lead man into deeper and deeper darkness and ignorance. If all the will power you find in the world were directed along the right channels, this world of ours would immediately become a heaven.

The nurse of a little girl complained to the latter's mother that she was finding it difficult to control the girl. The mother asked the nurse to exercise more will power. She replied: 'I try, but her "won't-power" is greater than my will power.' This is the problem with the spiritual child also. He wants to do many things. He wants to meditate always, he wants to be absorbed in spiritual thoughts, but his mind rebels. According to the Christian belief, the human will is by nature perverse. According to the Hindu belief, perversity of mind is caused by *saṁskāras* or latent impressions. These make the exercise of will in the right direction difficult. But *saṁskāras* can be changed or even destroyed. By doing good actions, by associating with good people, we gain good *saṁskāras*. Moreover, by continually exercising our will power, however limited it may be in the beginning, we strengthen it. Then spiritual life becomes easier.

God's grace comes in the form of self-effort. The sign that we have received God's grace is that we feel a tremendous urge to exercise our will power in the right direction, the determination to blast away all the obstacles in the path. Sri Ramakrishna has said:

> As long as man has not realized God, he thinks he is free. It is God Himself who keeps this error in man. Otherwise sin would have multiplied. Man would not have been afraid of sin, and there would have been no punishment for it. Those who have realized God are aware that free will is a mere appearance. In reality man is the machine and God its Operator, man is the carriage and God its Driver.[10]

One day a disciple asked Sri Sarada Devi, why God did not reveal Himself if He was really our own. The Holy Mother replied that was because few people had that penetrating understanding; most of the people took to religion as a formality.[11] Self-effort is needed to become conscious of the unity of our being with the Divine. When we purify our minds and put our will in tune with the divine Will, we find that everything happens by the divine Will. Then the conflict between self-effort and divine Grace will cease.

Change of attitude towards the world

This naturally means a revision of our ideas about ourselves and other people. We should do some rethinking on our relationship with others. Spiritual life must bring a change of our outlook on the world. Those who are bound by family ties should sublimate the existing relationships. If other people don't understand your attitude or do not like it, that is no reason why you should dance to their tune. If there is no bilateral agreement regarding spiritual life, you have to take a unilateral decision in this matter. You must learn to establish relationship with others through the Divine. Once you accept the spiritual ideal you must make it shine in all your attitudes and relationships.

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[10] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* op. cit., pp. 146, 328

[11] *At Holy Mother's Feet* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1963), p. 89

Two dangers are to be avoided in spiritual life. One is to love a human form with human love and falsely call it divine. The other is to become too indifferent to even the right feeling and become intensely selfish. Both are harmful to spiritual life. In order to love and serve others in the proper way we should try to reflect the glory of the Divine in our life. Then silence will be more eloquent than emotional expressions, and if speaking becomes necessary, that too will become helpful and effective. All relationships with others should be established through the Divine. It is possible to be loving, kind and considerate towards others without getting attached to them. All depends upon our change of attitude towards ourselves.

Spiritual life should bring about a change of our outlook on God and the world. But this is possible only when it brings about a change of our outlook on ourselves. This is the most important point to grasp in spiritual life. Unless a person starts regarding himself as the soul, the self separate from body and mind, he has not even begun his spiritual life. Our old images about ourselves must be replaced by a new self-image. This change of outlook on oneself is what distinguishes a true spiritual aspirant from the average so-called religious people. At first when the change takes place the aspirant may not have any clear idea of what the soul really means. Whatever his conception, it is enough if he regards it as something separate from body and mind and identifies himself with it.

There is a true story of a Chinese who had been imprisoned for sixty years. On the coronation of the new emperor he was released, but he exclaimed as he came out, 'I cannot bear so much light, I cannot bear so much freedom.' So, at his own request, he was sent back to the dungeon. Something similar to this happens in our case. We are so much accustomed to our ignorance and suffering that we do not want a new life. We are so much accustomed to the darkened image of our ego that we cannot bear the brilliant light of our true Self.

If some of us are not sick enough to be sent to a lunatic asylum, we still suffer from nervous troubles and lead divided lives. Before it is too late let us learn how to take care of ourselves, how to realize the ideal of a good life. Dr. Jung, the famous psychiatrist, has made a significant remark: 'About a third of my cases are suffering from no clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and emptiness of their lives.'[12]

It is this urge to realize a higher ideal that lies at the back of modern man's search for 'meaning'. Einstein's Theory of Relativity, Max Planck's Quantum Theory, the discovery of radioactivity, and of the existence of a vast number of galaxies, Darwin's Theory of Evolution, Freud's researches into the human unconscious, and other developments of modern science, have shattered the fixity of human values. What was formerly thought to be clear and definite has become transient and unknown. The two World Wars and other social changes have made morality a relative concept. This sense of transience of values and worthlessness of human life is reflected in modern art, literature and philosophy.

Right attitude towards God and Grace

Why are we born? What is the meaning of existence? Many people in the West believe that we are all creatures of matter and are helplessly caught in its powerful laws. There are some who believe that man was born by mistake. Attempts have been made by some eminent scientists to make mind a refined product of matter and endow it with a spiritual destiny. In the midst of all this confusion of ideas, the institutionalized religions are somehow going on with their old ideas of 'creation out of nothing' and 'original sin'.

The Buddhists, most of whom do not believe in the permanence of the soul, hold that man is a combination of changing entities passing through cycles of birth and death owing to desires which have their roots in ignorance. They liken personality to a flowing stream or a flickering flame. They lay too much emphasis on change and lose sight of the changeless Substance in man.

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[12] Carl G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul and Co., 1953), p. 70

The majority of modern psychologists have given up the idea that mind is an epiphenomenon, a by-product of the organized brain that secretes thought as the liver secretes bile. To most of them the mind is as real as the body. The individual, they say, is not a mind plus body or a body plus mind, but an integrated body-mind.[13] There are thinkers who, prepared to go further, hold that the mind is something nonmaterial which cannot be seen, touched, measured or weighed. It is something 'spiritual', as they say. In the West a spiritual man is one who regards his mind and its needs as superior to his body. The religious man thinks that this mind or 'spirit' survives after the death of the body. The mind is the vital motive power of action. Man's personality is the sum total of his behaviour with reference to mental factors, but he needs a body for the manifestation of the mental powers. However, western psychology stops half way through when it treats man merely as a psychological being, a complex of mind and emotions.

The Hindu view goes deeper. Human personality is complex. Man in his essential nature is a self-conscious spiritual entity clothed both in a subtle mental body and in a gross physical body. The Self or Ātman is separate from the physical body and the mind. The subtle body is more lasting than the physical body but that too is discarded by the Self when it attains final freedom. Individual consciousness identified with the subtle body comes to be associated with the gross body at birth. Death is the separation of the subtle body from the gross. Liberation or *mukti* is the separation of the Self (Ātman) even from the subtle body.

The Hindu view is echoed in the lines sung by Orpheus, 'Man is a child of earth and the starry heavens.' In the Judeo-Christian Bible we are told that man is created in the image of God[14], stored for a time within the temple of the body. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* says:

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[13] R.A. Strecker and K.E. Appel, *Discovering Ourselves* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1954), p. 19

> Even as the embodied self passes in this body through the stages of childhood, youth and old age, so does it pass into another body.
>
> As a person casts off worn-out clothes and puts on others that are new, so the embodied self casts off the worn-out body and enters into another that is new.[15]

Sri Ramakrishna, watching the passing away of his nephew, declared after the event: 'The subtle body like a sword was drawn from the scabbard of the physical body.'[16] Sri Ramakrishna sometimes saw his own soul leaving his physical body. And devotees often saw him, even during his earthly life, when his body was elsewhere. His divine consort Sri Sarada Devi once had an experience of her soul leaving her body and rising to higher spiritual planes. When it came down again it was at first reluctant to re-enter the body.[17]

In *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* we read of the police sergeant who goes his rounds in the dark of the night with a bull's-eye lantern. No one can see his face; but with the help of that light the sergeant can see the faces of others. If you want to see his face you must request him to turn the light towards his own face. In the same way, says Sri Ramakrishna, if you want to see the Lord you must pray to Him: 'O Lord, in Thy mercy do Thou turn the light of wisdom toward Thine own face.' Sri Ramakrishna further says, 'A house without light indicates poverty. So one must light the lamp of knowledge in one's heart.'[18]

Our spiritual teachers tell us that divine Grace comes in the form of self-effort, spiritual yearning and striving. These enable the spiritual seeker to experience that direct form of divine Grace which brings about the union between the soul and God or Brahman. Hindu scriptures say:

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[14] *Bible*, Genesis, 1.26,27

[15] *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 2.13,22

[16] Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, trans. Swami Jagadananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1963), p. 340

[17] Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1977), p. 164

[18] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., p. 107

> A man should uplift himself by his higher Self. Let him not weaken himself. The lower self, if properly cultivated, acts as his friend; if neglected, it acts as his enemy.[19]
>
> To men, their mind alone is the cause of bondage or emancipation.[20]

And yet many Hindus become fatalistic and throw themselves at the mercy of chance.

The same thing has happened in the Christian world, in spite of what Jesus taught, 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.'[21] He meant spiritual striving. 'Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.'[22] Jesus taught a dynamic spiritual life, a life of intense struggle and effort. This was the life lived by the great Christian mystics; and yet, owing to too much stress on the ideas of sin, vicarious atonement, and easy salvation, which crept into Christian religion, many active persons working successfully in the material world have hypnotized themselves into thinking that they can do nothing on the spiritual plane. As a result of this hypnotism, which has taken away the spiritual initiative emphasized by the great mystics, a tremendous amount of energy has been diverted solely for material purposes. There is an over-emphasis on material achievements. Neglecting the spiritual ideal, modern civilization is rushing headlong towards destruction which can still be prevented if necessary steps are taken before it is too late.

A drunken man was taken before a magistrate who asked his police escort, 'What gave you the impression that the prisoner was the worse for drink?' The policeman answered, 'He was arguing with a taxi driver.' 'That does not prove anything', said the judge. 'But, sir', persisted the officer, 'there was no taxi driver.' Now, many of us are doing the same thing. Being emotionally drunk we see enemies everywhere and fight them with all our strength, forgetting that within ourselves we have worse enemies who are ready to destroy us morally and spiritually. Our fighting spirit could be more effectively used in fighting our own egos, our own passions. These are our greatest enemies when we are drunk with the wine of ignorance and destructive tendencies. According to Swami Vivekananda, man has hypnotized himself into the false idea of his ego.[23]

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[19] *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 6.5,6

[20] मन एव मनुष्याणां कारणं बन्धमोक्षयोः ।
Amṛtabindu Upaniṣad, 2

[21] *Bible*, St. Matthew, 5:48

[22] ibid., 7:21

Change of attitude towards ourselves

In Greek mythology there is the story of Narcissus, a beautiful youth who fell in love with his own reflection in the waters of a pool. He pined away and died, because self-love can end only in frustration. Such self-love is a disease, which Dr. Carl Jung has correctly diagnosed when he says, '. . . the ego is ill for the very reason that it is cut off from the whole and has lost its connection with mankind and with the spirit'[24] — which is the true self. There is a Hindu saying, 'Having drunk the wine of ignorance, the whole world becomes mad.'

Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'All troubles come to an end when the ego dies.' And, 'A man achieves neither knowledge nor liberation as long as he has egotism.'[25] Further, he used to say, 'When bound by ties one is Jīva, and when free from ties one is Śiva (the Divine).'[26]

Patañjali, the great teacher of Yoga, describes how the soul is swayed by ignorance which is not a negative entity, for it creates a dangerous fantasy known as egotism. Egotism breeds attachment; attachment leads to aversion. The result of this chain reaction is a tremendous clinging to life and suffering.[27] To be egocentric is to be spiritually ill. All spiritual paths are designed to cure the illness of the ego. In Hindu teaching we speak of these paths as Yogas. First of all comes Karma-yoga or selfless activity, in which the fruits of all works are offered to the supreme Spirit in a spirit of self-surrender. Gradually, every kind of activity becomes a self-offering and the selfish ego is conquered.

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[23] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,* op. cit., Vol. II (1971) pp. 198, 295

[24] *Modern Man in Search of a Soul,* op. cit., p. 141

[25] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* op. cit., pp. 596, 600

[26] ibid., pp. 259, 677

We have also the path of Rāja-yoga, which proceeds by concentrating the mind on higher and higher levels of personality. In the course of this investigation, the soul finds that it is not the ego or the mind but a separate spiritual entity. The seeker strives to dispose of his ego by dwelling on the true nature of the Self, and this destroys the great illusion that confuses it with the body and the mind.

In Jñāna-yoga the spiritual seeker goes still further. From individual consciousness he rises to the cosmic consciousness — the ego gets merged in Brahman. In this Yoga of knowledge, even the subtlest form of 'I'-consciousness is destroyed.

But the easiest path to follow during the *Kali-yuga*, the present age in which we live, is the path of devotion, Bhakti-yoga. The spiritual aspirant worships God as Father, Mother, Friend, or Comrade — all with intense love and self-surrender. Our lives become a continuous service of the Lord. Sri Ramakrishna said: 'It is true that one or two can get rid of the "I" through *samādhi*; but these cases are very rare. . . . Therefore if the "I" must remain, let the rascal remain as the "servant" .'[28] Through this loving service the ego gradually loses its evil nature and gets transmuted into the higher Jīva which acts as an instrument in the hands of the Lord. In the words of Sri Ramakrishna, the 'unripe ego' is changed into the 'ripe ego' which is harmless.[29]

We can actually feel the separateness of the Self not only from the body but also from the mind. As one practises the moral and spiritual disciplines of Yoga, one comes to have a sharp awareness of the indivisible Spirit as the individual soul dwelling within a specific human body. What is divided is not the Jīvātman but the individual mind. What we think of as separateness is due to a cleavage in the mind. Moral culture and spiritual practice awaken a new sense, the faculty of intuition, that reveals to us that we are neither the body nor the mind. We can be the witness of our own thoughts and emotions. As the Upaniṣad has it: 'The soul expresses itself through the senses; the senses are instruments of the soul.'[30] There is a great joy in this realization that the soul can be separated from the body, that we are not really bound by the limitations of human life.

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[27] Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtras*, 2.3-9

[28] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., p. 103

[29] ibid., p. 209, 103

When we forget this truth about our real nature and identify ourselves with the ego, we become a plaything of nature. The egocentric individual is like a play ball in the hands of a capricious child. He has no freedom. He is at the mercy of the forces of Nature. People who are highly egotistic will find spiritual life very difficult. They mistake their own lower impulses for something very grand and follow them. They do not pause to listen to 'still small voice' of conscience within them. A certain amount of ego reduction is an essential prerequisite for all people who want to embark on the spiritual adventure. What is needed is not just false outer humility but a dignified modesty based on faith in our potential divinity. Without an attitude of self-surrender to the Divine, a spirit of dispassion and a spirit of acceptance of moral correctives, spiritual life becomes very difficult. In other words, we should strive to bring about a total change in our attitude towards ourselves, towards the world, and towards God.

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[30] *Kena Upaniṣad,* 1.2

PART II

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

(i) Preparations

CHAPTER 7

WALKING ON THE RAZOR'S EDGE

What the Upaniṣad teaches

A seer of the Upaniṣads, after having followed the spiritual path and after having realized the supreme Spirit, spoke in these terms: 'The wise ones say that the path to the realization of the supreme Spirit is as difficult to tread as the sharp edge of a razor.'[1] However, through proper training even the most difficult path may be followed and the supreme goal attained. This is what the ancient Hindu philosophical and spiritual teachers discovered. What kind of training are we expected to undergo before we embark on the difficult but most important journey into the realm of the Spirit? To quote the Upaniṣad again:

> Know the Ātman to be the master of the chariot, and the body as the chariot. Consider the intellect *(buddhi)* as the charioteer, and the mind as the rein. The senses, they say, are the horses and the roads are the sense objects. The wise call Him (the Ātman) the enjoyer when He is united with the body, the senses and the mind.
>
> One who is always of an unrestrained mind, devoid of discrimination, has his senses uncontrollable like the wicked horses of the charioteer. But he who is always of a restrained mind, has right discrimination, has his senses controllable like the good horses of the charioteer. He who is devoid of right discrimination, who is thoughtless and always impure, never attains the goal and gets into the round of births and deaths. But he who is associated with a discriminating intellect, ever pure, with the mind controlled, reaches that goal whence none is born again. The man who has a discriminating intellect for his charioteer and a well-controlled mind as the reins, attains the end of

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[1] क्षुरस्य धारा निशिता दुरत्यया दुर्गं पथस्तत् कवयो वदन्ति।

Kaṭha Upaniṣad, 1.3.14

> the road — the supreme experience of the all-pervading Spirit.
>
> The (subtle) sense objects are superior to the senses. The mind is superior to the sense objects. The intellect is superior to the mind. The cosmic Spirit (great Ātman), again, is superior to the intellect; the Unmanifest is higher than the cosmic Spirit; Puruṣa is superior to the Unmanifest. But nothing is superior to Puruṣa, the infinite transcendental Spirit. This Ātman, the Self of man, hidden in all beings, reveals Itself not to all, but is seen only by the subtle seers through their one-pointed and subtle intellects. The wise man should merge his speech in his mind, and his mind in his intellect. He should merge the intellect in the cosmic Spirit, and the cosmic Spirit in the Self of Peace, the transcendental Spirit.[2]

And here the teacher exhorts the disciple:

> Having approached the enlightened teachers, arise, awake, and realize the Self — realize the Ātman. . .. One becomes freed from the jaws of death only by realizing the highest Reality which is soundless, colourless, tasteless, odourless, immutable, beginningless, everlasting, and which transcends even the cosmic Mind *(mahat)*.[3]

As we read these passages, we comprehend why our spiritual teachers place before us the highest ideal and also speak to us about the necessity of acquiring proper qualifications without which no spiritual realization is possible, without which even the spiritual path may prove to be dangerous. But with the required training, one can reach the goal ultimately.

Need for training to walk on the razor's edge

Many people are afraid of following the spiritual path. But if we have the real training, we need not be afraid at all. Is it merely a child's play to drive a motor-car? Is it possible for an untrained person to fly an aeroplane or to skate or ski? No. These are all dangerous sports and pastimes, but if one is properly trained, one may do all these with control and grace.

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[2] ibid., 1.3.3–13

[3] ibid., 1.3.14,15

Spiritual practice is extremely necessary if we want to live in the world rightly and want to make spiritual progress.

In November 1882 Sri Ramakrishna, the great prophet of modern India, went to see a circus in Calcutta in the company of Rakhal (later, Swami Brahmananda) and some other disciples. At the circus there were exhibitions of various feats. One of these impressed the Master greatly. A horse raced around a circular track over which large iron rings were hung at intervals. The circus rider, an Englishwoman, stood on one foot on the horse's back, and as the horse passed under the rings, she jumped through them, always alighting on one foot on the horse's back. The horse raced around the entire circle several times but the woman never missed the horse or lost her balance. This feat, to be sure, must have taken years of practice to accomplish. The Master enjoyed it. It reminded him of what one should do in one's spiritual life. Sri Ramakrishna told one of the devotees present:

> Did you see how the Englishwoman stood on one foot on her horse, while it ran like lightning? How difficult a feat that must be! She must have practised a long time. The slightest carelessness, and she would break her arms or legs; she might even be killed. One faces the same difficulty leading the life of a householder. A few succeed in it through the grace of God and as a result of their spiritual practice. But most people fail. Entering the world, they become more and more involved in it; they drown in worldliness and suffer the agonies of death. A few only like Janaka have succeeded, through the power of austerity, in leading spiritual life as householders. Therefore spiritual practice is extremely necessary; otherwise one cannot rightly live in the world.[4]

Not only that, one may suffer from many agonies without the balance and peace one obtains through spiritual practices.

As in every walk of life, so also in spiritual life, there are dangers to be avoided and obstacles to be overcome. And do you know what is the greatest obstacle in spiritual life? It is the tendency to live a fashionable religion. That is possible so long as one does not have spiritual hunger. But when this hunger is born in the soul, one yearns for divine realization. One cannot then sit quiet. One is urged to follow the spiritual path which takes one nearer and nearer to the ultimate goal. Our teachers tell us that a human birth is a great privilege. Having attained this human birth, if a person just leads the life of an animal, it is a pity.

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[4] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 85

One may read no end of books. One may listen to no end of lectures. But if one's mind is not inclined to the spiritual ideal, everything has been in vain. So, in India the spiritual teachers tell us: 'You must win the grace of your own mind.' It is not enough if we have the grace of God and the grace of a teacher. We might have been fortunate in receiving many spiritual instructions. But unless we have the grace of our own mind everything comes to nothing. Our mind must be open to Truth. Now, even if the mind is open to Truth, even if we possess real love for the spiritual ideal, training is necessary. Good training is necessary even in worldly pursuits. We cannot do work of any kind without the necessary education and practice. And the same is true of spiritual life.

Here is an anecdote to illustrate the point: A young man who had no special training was over-anxious to get a position as an executive, and he went to a bank, saw one of the vice-presidents and told him he would like very much to get a good job — the job of an executive. The official who was interviewing the young man said, 'I am sorry, we have none. We already have twelve vice-presidents!' The young man, undaunted, replied: 'I have no superstition about the number — I don't mind becoming the thirteenth.'

Well, vice-presidents are not made that way. They are to be trained. Similarly, if you want to attain the highest goal, if you want to walk on the 'edge of the razor', you need special training. You will be cut into pieces if you make an attempt without it. But if you are properly trained, there is absolutely no fear and you may even find pleasure in walking on the edge of the razor.

We all know what happens to a weak electric wire when a high-voltage electric current is passed through it. The wire will burn up. Similarly, when, without proper preparation, we want to be in tune with the cosmic Spirit, so great will the pressure be that our body, our nerves, our mind will not be able to bear it. This is a fact. So, in order to follow the spiritual path, we need a strong body, a strong mind and intellect and strong senses. Otherwise all our struggle will end in failure.

The 'Sphinx' within

The biological laws of the 'struggle for existence' and the 'survival of the fittest' hold good in the spiritual world also. In the animal world, animals fight with animals. In the lower human world men fight with men and only the strongest survive. In the domain of spiritual life, the fight is not between man and man, but between the lower and higher natures of man. And we all know what it is — how our higher nature and our lower nature go on fighting and fighting and bring us no end of misery.

In Greek mythology, the Sphinx is a monster having a lion's body and the head of a woman. The Sphinx of Thebes, they say, used to ask the Thebans to guess a riddle. She however, stipulated a hard condition: Whoever failed to give the correct answer had to die, but if anyone gave the right answer, he would sit on the throne of Thebes. The question she asked was: 'What walks on four feet in the morning, on two at noon, and on three in the evening?' She strangled many who failed to give the correct answer. Oedipus, it is said, solved the riddle by saying, 'Man crawls on all fours as a baby, walks upright in the prime of life, and uses a staff in old age.' Now, we are told, upon hearing the correct answer, the Sphinx jumped into the sea and killed herself, and Oedipus became the King of Thebes.

In Egyptian mythology, the Sphinx has a lion's body and a man's head. The Roman Sphinx of a later period sometimes has a man's and sometimes a woman's head. Well, the Sphinx represents us all — men and women. Indeed, we men and women are all strange creatures. We combine both animal and human elements in our character, and these elements hide the Spirit. When the Sphinx asks, 'What are you?', are we able to answer? If we can answer 'I am the Spirit', the Sphinx in us would die. Then we would experience the awakening of Self-knowledge, the coming of the knowledge of the true man — the Self — the Spirit in us, and this strange personality, the combination of opposites, would disappear.

Try to be cosmo-centric

Let us now turn to the analogy we read in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad:*

> The Soul is the master of the chariot; the body is the chariot; the intellect is the charioteer; the mind is the rein.
>
> The senses are the horses;. . .[5]

But when we look within our chariot and see what the team-mates are doing, we will be shocked. We find that the soul is drunk. Intellect, the charioteer, has fallen unconscious; the reins, the mind, have become slack; the horses, the senses, are running wild. And a great disaster awaits the chariot, the horses, and their master, unless something is done right away to bring about a new order. Our teacher tells us that owing to ignorance, our soul, the master of the chariot, has identified himself too much with the intellect, the mind, the senses, and the body. He considers himself to be the enjoyer. He has forgotten his true nature.

Patañjali, the ancient teacher of Yoga, tells us that ignorance makes the soul forget its true spiritual nature.[6] And then the soul starts dreaming false dreams creating no end of fantasy, and also spends its time in sleep and dwelling on past memories. Every moment the soul wants to run away from itself. That is what ignorance does. Ignorance breeds egotism, attachment, and aversion, and creates in man tremendous clinging to life. Because of this clinging to life, he behaves in strange ways.

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[5] *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.3.3,4

[6] Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtras,* 2.5,24

To further our own petty interests we do not mind harming others. We tell lies. We sometimes would like even to steal what others possess. We live a wild sensuous life, and often we also live like a parasite depending too much on others. But when we begin spiritual life we should start making a change. We should learn how to practise harmlessness, sympathy, truthfulness, non-greediness, chastity and independence. We are too lazy to remain clean physically and mentally. We are always full of discontent, we grumble and complain against everyone, and we want to lead an easy going life. In modern days we read quite a lot of books, but our reading is desultory. We fill our brain with no end of other people's thoughts, and these thoughts, remaining as foreign matter, create mental indigestion. And then our whole life is egocentric.

What should we do?

Our teachers tell us: 'Try to be clean in body and mind. Try to be cheerful. Try to follow a little asceticism. Do not be too soft. Instead of doing desultory reading and permitting your mind to wander from one thing to another, do some deep study and thinking. Instead of remaining egocentric, try to offer all the fruits of your labour to the Divine who is the eternal Guide of all and dwells in everyone.' But we do not listen to this advice. We entertain most disharmonious thoughts and emotions. We perform mostly crude actions, and even if we have begun our spiritual life, we fall a prey to various diseases caused by bad emotions. We feel helpless at times. We have no energy left. We vacillate, we cannot decide. Our mind and body are full of *tamas,* dullness. Now, all these must change. We must try to turn over a new leaf. Patañjali says: 'Whenever these obstructions arise, try to think of the Spirit.'[7] Try to create in you a higher mood by which you may rise above lethargy, vacillation and so on that characterize your present life. But even here we are unstable and unreliable, and that is one of the greatest troubles we all suffer from. We cannot trust ourselves fully and that is the greatest difficulty.

Patañjali advises us to overcome these obstacles one by one.

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[7] ibid., 1.32

'Counteract bad thoughts by good thoughts, counteract hatred by love.'[8] But we should not stop there. After reaching a certain level in purification of mind, try to develop the cosmic perspective. Try to think more and more of the supreme Spirit who dwells in your heart. Repeat the divine Name, meditate on the supreme Spirit — the Teacher of teachers — and you will see that you are able to rise above your present unstable nature.[9] By thinking of the Infinite, one comes to have something of the Infinite's nature. Through perfection of the repetition of the divine Name, and meditation, the supreme Spirit becomes manifest. Then one succeeds in attaining union between the individual soul and the supreme Spirit.

Wanted a minimum of moral qualification

The teachers of the Upaniṣads speak to us in the same strain. These sages have freed themselves from defects and impurities and have realized the resplendent Self which dwells in the heart. The teachers of Vedānta, like the teachers of Yoga, go into great details. They want us to have good bodies, strong, healthy senses, and a pure and concentrated mind. Without these one can never succeed in following the spiritual path and achieve something substantial in the world of the Spirit.

The teachers often speak of the defects of the body and the senses. The body is disharmonious. The various organs of the body do not function properly. They do not work in harmony. There are also the defects of the senses which have a tendency to rush towards their objects and to come in touch with them. Again, there are diseases of the mind: desire, doubt, indecision, dullness, lack of concentration. These taint the mind. There are other defects of the mind too: wrong understanding, too much of vanity, seeing and understanding things in the wrong light. Now, all these defects are to be removed. So, here too, like the teachers of Yoga, the teachers of Vedānta declare: 'Try to have a certain minimum of moral and spiritual qualification. Learn to discriminate. Think clearly. Learn to find out what is Real and what is unreal, what is changing and what is permanent, what lasts just for a few days and what stays on. Practise as much as you can the control of the senses and the mind. Learn to withdraw yourself from things you do not want to come in touch with. Have great perseverance and deep faith. Develop faith in your true Self, faith in God, faith in the teachings you are following, and faith in your ability to realize the Truth. And along with that, try to practise simple forms of concentration.' As already pointed out, all spiritual teachers in all ages, in all religions, speak to us of the necessity of practising purity. Christian mystics call it 'purgation'. This is the first step. In order to follow the spiritual path successfully what we need is a basic minimum of moral qualities.

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[8] ibid., 2.33

[9] ibid., 1.28,29

Wanted not physical but inner beauty

What matters most in spiritual life, our teachers tell us, is not the beauty of the physical form, but the beauty of the mind, harmony of the mind. We must develop the capacity of the mind to penetrate into the deepest mystery of life. We need inner beauty, moral beauty.

There is an anecdote about President Lincoln who was not a good-looking person. Once a Philadelphian delegation went to meet him, and they introduced one of their members saying, 'He has been good enough to paint and present to our league room a most beautiful portrait of yourself.' President Lincoln thought it over and, turning to the painter, said: 'I presume, sir, in painting that portrait you took your idea of me from my principles and not from my person.' And that is what is needed. The purity of mind and heart shines through the body. I have seen most homely persons possessing a remarkable grace that most beautiful bodies do not possess. Besides, pure and illumined souls radiate holy and harmonious vibrations which have not only a pleasant but also an elevating influence on all those who come in touch with them.

As I have mentioned already, our spiritual teachers are very much concerned about making us properly qualified to follow the higher spiritual life, for without it we cannot 'walk on the razor's edge'.

Our defects

The defects of the body, the disharmonious functioning of the body, are to be removed. An ancient teacher of the Upaniṣads prayed with his disciples: 'May all my limbs, speech, breath, eye, ear, vitality and all senses become perfected.'[10] When this harmony is attained, we shall feel that it is a joy to live in the body. How to achieve this harmony of the members of the body? Avoid unhealthy food, live a regulated, temperate life, perform selfless work, lead a moral life. Harmonious thoughts and actions make the body harmonious.

The defects of the senses are to be removed by withdrawing them from evil objects and diverting them along right lines. This is not repression or suppression. Hear and see what is good, pure, spiritual. Use your senses in such a way that instead of impoverishing you they enrich you by bringing you good food for the mind.

The defects of the mind are to be got rid of by living a life guided not by impulses but by higher reason and reflection. We should avoid what is harmful, and acquire what is helpful to our spiritual life. What is helpful may be very unpleasant but still we must have it, and by following that we succeed in removing the defects of the mind to a great extent.

Our mind gives us various kinds of troubles especially when we want to control it. We find sometimes it is too dull. It does not want to move. Sometimes it is mad, running from one thing to another. And even if the dense mind remains a little quiet sometimes, it again starts its mad course. But through training this mad mind can be made concentrated. Our teachers tell us that our food should be pure. The food that we eat through the mouth should be pure. It should produce harmony in the body. Similarly, the food that we take through all our senses must be pure. That helps us to build up a pure subtle body. The food that we take through our mind — all our thoughts and emotions — also should be pure to help us to build up a harmonious subtle body. There is a

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[10] आप्यायन्तु ममाङ्गानि वाक्प्राणश्चक्षुः श्रोत्रमथो बलमिन्द्रियाणि च सर्वाणि. . . ॥
— Śānti Pāṭha to the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*

Sanskrit proverb which says, even if you feed the snake with pure milk it will manufacture only unbearable poison.[11] That is its nature. In the same way, eating pure vegetarain food alone is not enough. Our nature must change. We should become pure, loving, and sweet-tempered.

Various are the defects we suffer from. Now, are we going to remove these defects one by one? Some psychologists tell us to relax the head, then relax the ears, relax the nose, relax the hands, relax the trunk, relax the feet, and so on. Some others advise us not to suppress our desires but to go and freely express them. But in actual life, few people have got lasting benefit from such piecemeal attempts at improving one-self. Vedānta goes to the root of the matter. It deals with your whole Self. Behind the ordinary self or ego there stands the Ātman, the higher Self which is the source of purity, strength and bliss. The more you seek it and allow it to manifest itself through your actions and thoughts, the more perfect and peaceful you become. Swami Vivekananda, Sri Ramakrishna's greatest disciple, gives us the advice: 'Teach yourself, teach everyone his real nature. Call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.'[12] Not to try to purify oneself limb by limb, but to try to take hold of the indivisible Self — that is what Vedānta teaches.

Modern psychology and morality

Nowadays moral disciplines have come to be too much connected with repression and suppression, to use modern psychological terms. The ancient Hindu sages believed in giving a higher direction to the senses — 'May we hear with our ears what is pure. May we see with our eyes what is holy. May we praise and worship the divine Spirit and enjoy with strong and steady limbs and body the life allotted to us.'[13]

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[11] फणी पीत्वा क्षीरं, वमति गरलं दुःसहतरम्।

[12] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1964), Vol. III. p. 193

One really feels harmony and peace when one is a master of one's own senses, master of one's own mind, when one follows the spiritual life without conflicts and in a spontaneous way. The process of mental purification is called 'purgation' in mystic language, and 'sublimation' in psychological terms. It is a process of giving a higher turn to the desires or 'primary instincts'.

Modern psychology has discovered a technique which was known to the ancient spiritual teachers of India in a more thorough way. In modern psycho-analytical technique the main task is to bring into consciousness or awareness the underlying and deep-seated causes of the patient's mental troubles. Some unscrupulous psychologists may advocate a free play of the morbid tendencies in the patient but in the words of Dr. Hadfield, an eminent psychiatrist, 'From the point of view of cure, the advice to go and "express your instincts" is . . . foolish . . . in actual experience I have never known a true neurosis cured by . . . sexual libertinism.'[14]

In the psycho-analytical method so widely practised nowadays the patient is asked 1. to regard the disturbing desire in a new light and accept it wholly or in part without fear or disgust, or 2. to face the trouble deliberately and reject it without feeling too much sense of guilt, or 3. to direct it along a higher channel to a higher goal.

Dr. Adler, the founder of the school of Individual Psychology, always advocates the pursuit of what he calls a healthier style of life, useful to the community. The Hindu spiritual teacher also wants us to give a higher turn to all our passions. Says Sri Ramakrishna, 'Direct the six passions to God. The impulse of *lust* should be turned into the desire to have communion with the divine Spirit. Feel *angry* at those who stand in the way to God. Feel *greedy* for Him. If you must have the feeling of *I and mine,* then associate it with God. If you must have *pride,* then feel proud thinking that you are a servant of God or a child of God.'[15]

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[13] भद्रं कर्णेभिः श्रुणुयाम देवाः भद्रं पश्येमाक्षभिर्यजत्राः ।
स्थिरैरङ्गैस्तुष्टुवांसस्तनूभिर्व्यशेम देवहितं यदायुः ॥
Ṛg-Veda, 1.89.8

[14] J.A. Hadfield, *Psychology and Morals* (London: Methuen and Co., 1923), p. 100

How truly does Dr. Adler remark: 'By changing our opinion of ourselves we can also change ourselves.' Swami Vivekananda said, 'Teach yourself, teach everyone his real nature. . . . Power will come, goodness will come, purity will come, everything that is excellent will come . . . .' The Hindu teacher goes to the very logical conclusion of this ideal — to a point beyond the scope of the ordinary psychologist.

The Middle Path

In our present state of consciousness our body and mind are very much interconnected and affect each other. So we should take care of both. Remember the story of Buddha. He became tired of the pleasures of the palace, left his home and practised severe asceticism. One day as he was about to stand up he fell down unconscious. On reviving, he heard a charming song:

> The string o'erstretched breaks, and the music flies
> The string o'erslack is dumb, and music dies,
> Tune us the sitar neither low nor high.[16]

It was then that a village woman by name Sujātā came that way and Buddha gratefully accepted the bowl of milk-pudding that she offered. With his strength returned, he plunged into deep contemplation and attained illumination. Self-indulgence and self-mortification — both are to be avoided. Buddha discovered the Middle Path of right comprehension, right living, and right meditation — avoiding the extremes of mortification and indulgence. Centuries before Buddha, Śrī Kṛṣṇa had preached the same message: 'To him who is temperate in eating and recreation, in his work, in sleep and wakefulness, Yoga — spiritual practice — becomes a destroyer of misery.'[17] In still earlier times the Vedic sages said: 'Whatever food is suited to oneself, that protects — it injures not. A greater quantity injures and a smaller quantity protects not.'[18] The food that we eat with our mouths must be moderate and pure; the food that we take through the other senses also must be pure; there must also be moral culture; this is the Middle Path.

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[15] See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* op. cit., p. 155.

[16] *The Light of Asia* by Sir Edwin Arnold (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1943), p. 94

Power of concentration without purity may prove dangerous

Desires do not leave us all of a sudden. We may practise great control. We may cut ourselves off from the objects of desire, but the desire remains in the subtle form. This desire will disappear only with the dawn of spiritual consciousness,[19] and so we should try our best to awaken in us something of this spiritual consciousness.

Here is an instruction that we should try to remember always: It is dangerous to practise concentration before the attainment of minimum purity. Before we practise concentration or store up our energy, we must know how to direct this energy along higher channels; otherwise we may come to grief.

In India we have a parable: A man learned how to invoke a demon. He uttered some incantations and the demon made his appearance and said, 'Now give me work.' He asked the demon to do certain things and in no time those things were finished. The demon appeared again and demanded: 'Give me work, otherwise I shall break your neck', and the man did not know what to do. He had called up the demon and now he must give him some work to do. Then an idea struck him. Showing the demon a dog, he said, 'Well, straighten this dog's curly tail.'

We call up our energy but we do not know how to utilize it. This energy is frittered away in doing useless things and this is a great tragedy in spiritual life. We must know how to give this energy a higher turn. Otherwise this stored-up energy may stimulate our desires, may stimulate our senses; and if we do not succeed in giving these desires a higher turn, they may become like bombshells and wreck our body and mind. It is dangerous to try to play at concentration and meditation. But if we are properly trained, if we have the necessary qualifications, it is a joy to live a life of concentration and meditation.

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[17] *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 6.17

[18] *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa*, 9.2.1.1, quoted by Śaṁkara in his commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 6.16

[19] *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 2.59

If the energy is not properly directed, sometimes it may express itself as psychic powers. Probably we have learned to read other people's thoughts. We can know something of what is going to happen in the future, but we remain ignorant as to our own mind, as to our own spiritual nature. The ideal of spiritual life is to know what we are. If one has attained the necessary purity by following the methods described before, then this stored-up energy can be used in performing selfless work, in doing *japa*, in practising concentration and meditation. And all these then help us to move towards the Truth.

Surrender to the Supreme Being

In order to follow the spiritual path with success, the defects of the intellect and the ego also are to be removed. By persistently following the right path and strengthening the mind, the will becomes strong, and we certainly need a strong will for attaining success in spiritual life. When temptations assail us, when all the desires that lie in our subconscious mind appear before us and tempt us, we need a strong will. We must be able to follow the spiritual path, rising above all the various temptations that are sure to come to each and every one of us.

And the one thing we must remember in spiritual life is this: Egocentric moral and spiritual striving alone is not enough. So the teachers of Yoga, as well as the teachers of Vedānta, tell us: 'Along with the practice of disciplines one must also try to surrender the fruits of one's activities to Īśvara.'[20] To the *yogī* He is the Teacher of teachers. This Teacher of teachers is not far away from us. He dwells in our heart. In the West one does not very much appreciate God as the Teacher of teachers, but in India we do. Our parents bring us into the world, but our spiritual teachers help us to be born in the realm of the Spirit and help us to go beyond birth and death, misery and sorrow. In Vedānta, God — the supreme Spirit — is not only the Teacher of teachers but also the Soul of all souls.

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[20] Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtras*, 1.23; *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 9.27; 12.10,11

Each one of us is a part of the infinite Spirit. As our mind and heart become pure, whether in the initial stage we believe in a cosmic Spirit or not, we come to get hold of our individual inner Self. As we move further and further, we find that we are all really parts of a greater Whole and this is the greatest truth we need. We, as souls, are inseparable parts of the Oversoul, the supreme Spirit.

The Ātman, the Upaniṣad declares, 'is hidden in the hearts of all. It is seen only by the seers through their pure subtle intuition.'[21] A strange faculty is lying hidden in every one of us. It is the faculty by which the soul knows itself, by which it directly knows the supreme Spirit. Through moral practices, through prayers, through meditation, this dormant faculty is to be awakened; only then does spiritual life truly begin. It is only then that the spiritual aspirant may say he is walking on the edge of the razor. In him there awakens a great power of discrimination between the Real and the unreal. And with this razor of discrimination he removes from himself all that is not-Self. He cuts himself off from body consciousness, mind consciousness, and intellect consciousness. He realizes that he is the Spirit, and as the Spirit, he is an inseparable part of the supreme Spirit, the Soul of all souls. Here, having attained the highest purity, having dissociated itself from all things that are material, mental and emotional, the soul can walk on the razor's edge, and become united with the Oversoul. That is what is experienced by illumined seers.

Now, we may very well ask the question: 'What of ourselves?' We can be seers not simply by wishing but by following in the footsteps of those who realized the supreme Spirit, who walked on the edge of the razor, who divested themselves of all that is non-Spirit and realized the supreme Spirit. Following in their footsteps we may make a humble beginning in our spiritual life.

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[21] *Kaṭha Upaniṣad,* 1.3.12

Let us try to awaken in us the consciousness that we are the Spirit. Let us try to feel that we are all parts of the one Oversoul. Let us feel that the body is our chariot, the senses are our horses, our mind the reins, and the intellect the charioteer. Let us learn to have full control over this chariot. Following in the footsteps of the illumined souls, let us possess the right understanding. Let us restrain the mind, let us control the senses, let us follow steadily the path of spiritual realization. Let us awake. Let us arise. Let us follow the spiritual path step by step. Let us try to realize the true Self, the Self of all. Let us not stop till the goal is reached.

By walking on the razor's edge, by strictly following the spiritual path, let us attain illumination and bliss, and also help others to walk on the razor's edge, to follow the spiritual path and attain the same illumination and bliss.

CHAPTER 8

THE GURU AND SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Need for training in spiritual life

A disciple of the great Chinese mystic philosopher Lao Tsu narrates the following story. A young man joined the gang of a robber chief named Chi. One day the young apprentice asked his leader, 'Can the Tao (the right Way) be found in thieving?' And Chi replied: 'Pray tell me of anything in which there is no Tao, a law or right way. In thieving there is the *wisdom* by which the booty is located, the *courage* of going in first; the *heroism* of coming out last, the *insight* of calculating the chances of success; finally, there is *justice* in dividing the spoils equitably among the robbers. There never was a successful thief who did not possess these five qualities.'

There are principles to be learned in every activity of life, even in thieving. An apprentice in any profession needs training. This is all the more true of spiritual life. The disciple of Lao Tsu continues, 'The doctrine of the wise is equally indispensable to the good man and to the robber. . . . Since good men are few and bad men are in the majority, the good the sages do in the world is little and the evil done by the rest is great.' In the course of my travels in the West I have been amazed at the amount of energy which is constantly expended on destructive activities. How many soldiers, pilots, technicians and even scientists are being trained for war? Why can't even a fraction of the same time and energy be used for training in the spirit, in making ourselves receptive to divine illumination, bliss and peace?

The ideal which the great sages of the Upaniṣads place before us as the goal of life is Self-realization. But this ideal cannot be realized without spiritual awakening. However, in the religious field we see too much of ritual and ceremonial and too little of true spiritual awakening. Real religion, which is Self-realization, has for this reason become discredited. And there is now an over-abundance of religious pretenders who claim supernatural powers and promise easy passports to heaven, while parasites unwilling to strive for moral purity want to attain salvation easily.

The highest goal can be shown only by a person who has attained it or by one who has at least gone very near it. Regarding the importance of right guidance in spiritual life, the Upaniṣads declare:

> Many do not hear about the Self. Many others, though they hear of it, do not understand it. Wonderful is he who speaks of it. Wonderful is he who learns of it. Blessed is he who, taught by a good teacher, is able to realize it.[1]
>
> The truth of the Self cannot be fully understood when taught by an inferior person, for there are different opinions regarding it. Subtler than the subtlest is this Self, beyond all logic. When taught by a teacher who has realized himself as one with Brahman, a person attains the goal and becomes free from transmigration.[2]
>
> Let a man devoted to spiritual life examine carefully the ephemeral nature of heavenly enjoyment. To know the Eternal, let him humbly approach a *guru* established in Brahman and well versed in the scriptures. To a disciple who approaches reverently, who is tranquil and self-controlled, the wise teacher gives that knowledge, faithfully and without stint, by which is known the truly existing, changeless Self.[3]

Function of the Guru

What does Self-realization mean? It means the union of the individual spirit with the supreme Spirit. After passing through various experiences and sufferings in life, the individual soul draws closer to the Oversoul and finally realizes its oneness with It. The Upaniṣad gives a picturesque description of this process:

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[1] श्रवणायापि बहुभिर्यो न लभ्यः श्रुण्वन्तोऽपि बहवो यं न विद्युः ।
आश्चर्यो वक्ता कुशलोऽस्य लब्धाऽऽश्चर्यो ज्ञाता कुशलानुशिष्टः ॥
Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.2.7

[2] न नरेणावरेण प्रोक्त एष सुविज्ञेयो बहुधा चिन्त्यमानः ।
अनन्यप्रोक्ते गतिरत्र नास्ति अणीयान् ह्यतर्क्यमणुप्रमाणात् ॥
ibid., 1.2.8

[3] *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.12,13

> Two birds of golden plumage, inseparable companions, are perched on the branches of the same tree. One of them tastes the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree; the other, tasting neither, calmly observes. The individual self, deluded by forgetfulness of its real divine nature, gets involved in worldly life and suffers. But when it recognizes the worshipful Lord as its own true Self and beholds His glory, it becomes liberated from sorrow.[4]

We have forgotten our true divine essence. So instead of moving closer to God, we get drowned in worldly existence more and more. Somebody must remind us of our real nature. He who does this is the *guru* or spiritual teacher. The function of the teacher is to awaken the disciple from his age-long sleep and show him the way to the Divine. The *guru* is not like the Christian priest who stands between man and God. The word *guru* etymologically means a spiritual guide who removes darkness and brings light.[5] He helps us to dehypnotize ourselves by removing the false notions we have been entertaining about ourselves.

In one of his parables Sri Ramakrishna speaks of a tiger-sheep. Once a tigress attacked a flock of sheep but, as the shepherd resisted, she fell on her side, gave birth to a cub and died. The shepherd took pity on the little creature and raised it along with the flock. The little tiger drank sheep's milk and learned to bleat and eat grass like sheep. Years later another tiger attacked the same flock and was astonished to see a tiger behaving like a sheep. He caught hold of the tiger-sheep, dragged him to a pool and forced him to look at his reflection in the water. Then the old tiger put a piece of meat into the mouth of the young tiger-sheep, and told him that he was not a sheep but a real tiger. Thereupon the tiger-sheep gave up his sheep consciousness and regained his real tiger consciousness.[6]

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[4] ibid., 3.1.1,2

[5] गुकारोऽन्धकारस्तु रुकारस्तन्निवर्तकः ।
अन्धकारनिवर्त्या तु गुरुरित्यभिधीयते ॥

Swami Brahmananda used to liken the teacher to a king's minister. A poor man requests the minister to grant him an audience with the king who lives in a palace with seven gates. The minister grants his request, and leads him through the gates one after another. At each gate there stands a richly dressed officer, and each time the poor man asks the minister if that is the king. The minister answers 'No' each time, until they have passed the seventh gate and have come to the presence of the king seated there in all his regal splendour. Then the poor man does not ask any more question. What he needed was somebody who could guide him through the gates and corridors of the palace. 'So is it with the *guru*', says Swami Brahmananda, 'Like the king's minister, he leads the disciple through the different stages of spiritual unfoldment until he leaves him with the Lord.'[7]

The human personality is like a big palace with buildings and courtyards one within another. The supreme Spirit comes to us in the form of a teacher, making us realize that we are not the physical body, not the mind, not the feelings, ideas and emotions, but the Spirit eternal. When we travel to an unknown country, it is wise to have a guide who knows the way. The *guru* is the guide who leads us to our destination and leaves us there.

Need for a Guru

In India we take the necessity of a *guru* for granted in spiritual life. When I first went to Europe I was surprised to hear some religious groups saying that they could commune with God, hear the voice of God, get directions about spiritual life without any special training. I studied a few cases and found, as I had expected, that these people were hearing their own voices which sometimes were good. God and the divine Voice are far off from an impure soul. A well-trained, pure-hearted person can certainly commune with God, the indwelling Spirit, but when impure and untrained individuals make the same claim, they only deceive themselves. And yet they say they need no outside help. My teacher Swami Brahmananda used to say, 'One requires a teacher even when one wants to learn stealing. And this sublime *Brahmavidyā*, the knowledge of Brahman — does it not require a teacher to acquire it?'[8]

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[6] See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), pp. 306-7.

[7] Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1971), p. 250

There is no mystery in this. People go to Madame Curie to study the properties of radium; they go to Rutherford to learn about the nature of the atom. As in natural science the guidance of a competent teacher is necessary, so in spiritual science the guidance of a *guru* is absolutely necessary to learn the technique of realizing the Self. Here we are travelling into regions of which we know nothing. Those who do not feel the need of any teacher, who are over-anxious to be teachers of others, should remember that the blind should not try to lead the blind.

Hindu scriptures repeatedly stress the importance of the *guru*. Take for instance the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. In it Kṛṣṇa at first simply takes Arjuna to the battlefield, without giving him any spiritual instruction. Then Arjuna pleads with Him: 'Overpowered by grief, my mind is confused regarding the right path. I supplicate You as Your disciple, instruct me who have taken refuge in You.'[9] It is only when Arjuna accepts Kṛṣṇa as the *guru* does the divine Teacher begin His teaching. In Śaṁkara's *Crest Jewel of Discrimination* we find the disciple appealing to his teacher: 'O Master, I have fallen into the sea of birth and death. Save me from this misery.'[10]

The power of spiritual initiation

Sri Ramakrishna says, 'One must have an awakening of the Spirit within in order to see the one unchanging imperishable Reality.' Mere reading and talking about spiritual truths is not enough. One should directly perceive the Light within.

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[8] *Spiritual Talks* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1944), p. 42-43

[9] *Bhagavad-Gītā* 2.7

[10] *Vivekacūdamaṇi*, 139

How is this first awakening to be brought about? An illumined teacher does this for the disciple through a process of spiritual initiation. In all religions there are initiation rites consisting of bath, baptism, sprinkling with holy water or oil, reciting of sacred texts, rituals of worship, etc. These practices make the initiates eligible for the special privileges of the religious communities into which they are admitted as members thereby. This formal initiation is very different from the spiritual initiation we are here speaking of.

This is what Jesus meant when he said, 'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'[11] To be born again means to undergo spiritual awakening, to cease to identify oneself with one's body and realize oneself as the Spirit. 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.'[12] Later on St. Peter, a disciple of Christ, explained the meaning of this passage: 'Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.'[13] The *guru* is one who transmits the word of God. The power of God comes through the word, the *mantra,* and through the *mantra* comes the awakening of the Spirit.

In India we have the ideal of the *dvija*, the twice-born. The word *dvija* also means a bird. First comes the egg, then out of the egg comes the fledgeling which will some day develop into a mature bird. All eggs do not get hatched; all fledgelings do not grow fully. Similarly, all people do not attain spiritual realization. People are in different stages of spiritual growth. A well-known Sanskrit verse says: 'By natural birth a man is born a Śūdra, an ignorant person; through purificatory rites he becomes a *dvija*, the twice-born; through study and knowledge of the scriptures he becomes a *vipra*, a scholar or poet; through the realization of the supreme Spirit he becomes a Brāhmaṇa, a knower of Brahman.'[14] The purpose of spiritual initiation is to enable a person to become a true Brāhmaṇa, a knower of Brahman. The Upaniṣad says, 'He who departs from this world knowing the Imperishable, is a Brāhmaṇa.'[15] Mahapurush Maharaj (Swami Shivananda), a great direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, once told me, 'Whoever comes to Sri Ramakrishna is really a Brāhmaṇa.'

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[11] *Bible,* St. John, 3:3

[12] ibid., 3:6

[13] *Bible,* I Peter, 1:23

[14] जन्मना जायते शूद्रः संस्काराद् द्विज उच्यते ।
वेदपाठी भवेद्विप्रः ब्रह्म जानाति ब्राह्मणः ॥
Atri Smṛti 141-42

Spiritual initiation brings the individual Self into harmony with the supreme Self. A Chinese sage demonstrated the principle of natural harmony (Tao) in this way: he took two lutes and strung them identically. One he placed in an adjoining room, then struck the Kung note on the instrument he held. Immediately the Kung note on the second lute responded. When he struck the Chio note on one, the corresponding string of the second instrument vibrated, because they were tuned to the same pitch. If he changed the intervals on one lute the tones of the second were jangled and out of tune. The sound was there but the influence of the key note was gone. Similarly, we may read and think and talk. But all this will be of no avail unless we learn to attune our souls to the Oversoul, the supreme Self.

The power of initiation becomes manifest only in a pure soul who intensely yearns for God. Patañjali distinguishes three types of disciples: The soft (*mṛdu*) ones who cannot bear much the rigours of spiritual disciplines; the middling (*madhyama*) ones who strive harder than the first; the intense (*tīvra*) type including those who struggle intensely for realization; they have learned the secret of withdrawing their minds from outside distractions, are always conscious of the divine Reality within them and have deep yearning for God.'[16] Yearning for God should always be regarded as a mark of divine Grace.

At the beginning of my own spiritual life the path seemed very difficult. When I asked Swami Brahmananda what I should do, his reply was, 'Struggle, struggle.' It is not enough to get directions from a *guru*; one must struggle incessantly.

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[15] अथ य एतदक्षरं गार्गि विदित्वास्माल्लोकात् प्रैति स ब्राह्मणः ॥
Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.8.10

[16] Cf. Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra* 1.22

The disciple must first of all yearn with all his heart to know the Truth. To those who are prepared for it the awakening may come all of a sudden. To others who are struggling it comes gradually.

When we are in a joyous mood, we are able to transmit that joy to others. In a similar way, a good spiritual teacher is able to communicate spiritual vibrations to his disciple. We have seen the great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna exercising this power on many occasions. They were great storehouses of spiritual power, but they used it with great caution. Normally a *guru* transmits his power through a *mantra*.

The power of the Mantra

A monastic disciple once asked Mahapurush Maharaj, 'All persons do not get spiritual awakening as soon as they are initiated. Will they not be benefited nevertheless?' Mahapurushji replied, 'Even though they may feel nothing at the time of initiation, the power of the holy Name given by an illumined teacher is unfailing. The spiritual power transmitted to the disciple in due course transmutes him and spiritual awakening follows.'

What about the initiation given by an advanced soul though not fully illumined? The ordinary advanced soul is about on a par with a senior in high school who, before he is ready for college himself, can still give elementary instruction to his juniors. As he himself progresses towards Truth, he strives to awaken spiritual consciousness in others. The initiation given by an ordinary *guru* who is sufficiently advanced in spiritual life also brings about spiritual awakening in the course of time, if the recipient sincerely follows the spiritual path. The *mantra* or the divine Name itself contains tremendous power. Śrī Caitanya teaches us this truth: 'Various are Thy names revealed by Thee into which Thou hast infused Thine own omnipotent powers, and no limitations of time for remembering those names are ordained by Thee.'[17]

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[17] नाम्नामकारि बहुधा निजसर्वशक्तिस्तत्रार्पिता नियमितः स्मरणे न कालः ।
Śikṣaṣṭakam, 2

Patañjali, speaking about the effect of repeating *Om* and other holy Names, says that it removes the various obstacles on the path and leads to the awareness of the indwelling Spirit.[18] What are these obstacles? They are illness, doubt, mental disturbances, etc. Repetition of the *mantra* introduces a new rhythm, harmony, into the personality, which calms the nerves and unifies the powers of the mind. And in due course, this leads to the awakening of the Spirit within. A beginner in meditative life may not be able to understand the power of the *mantra*. But if he sincerely repeats it, he will gradually realize its power. Swami Brahmananda says, '*Japam* — *japam* — *japam*! Even while you work, practise *japam*. Keep the name of the Lord spinning in the midst of all your activities. If you can do this, all the burning of the heart will be soothed. Many sinners have become pure and free and divine by taking refuge in the name of God. Have intense faith in God and in His name, know that they are not different.'[19]

As the saints showed in the past, so in the present it has been proved time and again that the power of God does manifest through the divine Name. When the *mantra* given by a *guru* is treasured up within and constantly meditated upon, this power develops more and more in the aspirant. Sri Ramakrishna used to liken this process to the formation of a pearl. According to popular belief, the pearl-oyster waits until the star *svāti* (Arcturus) is in the ascendant. If at that time rain falls, the oyster will open its shell and collect a drop of that water. Then it will dive down to the seabed and remain there for several months until the rain drop is converted into a beautiful pearl.[20] In the same way the heart of the devotee must be open to Truth and after receiving spiritual instruction from the *guru*, he must work on it with one-pointed zeal until the pearl of spiritual illumination is born.

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[18] ततः प्रत्यकचेतनाधिगमोऽप्यन्तरायाभावश्च ।

Yoga-Sūtra, 1.29

[19] *The Eternal Companion*, op. cit. p. 297

[20] *Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1975), pp. 180-181

The pure mind as Guru

Swami Brahmananda used to say, 'There is no greater *guru* than your own mind.' The human *guru* is not always at hand. Even if we are fortunate enough to secure the blessings and instructions of an advanced teacher, he may not be always available when we need him. But there is an inner teacher, our own purified mind, who is always present within us. Says Swami Brahmananda, 'When the mind has been purified by prayer and contemplation it will direct you from within. Even in your daily duties, this inner *guru* will guide you and will continue to help you until the goal is reached.'[21]

What does this mean? How does the mind act as the inner *guru*? The supreme Spirit, the source of all knowledge, the Teacher of all teachers, is ever present within the heart of everyone. When the mind is purified through moral life, prayer, meditation, etc., it comes in touch with the inner Light of the supreme Spirit. The purified mind becomes a channel for the flow of divine Knowledge. It receives spiritual guidance directly from the Teacher of teachers. When the mind thus learns to open itself to the inner Truth, it can receive instruction from many sources. The *Bhāgavatam* speaks of a wandering Avadhūta or ascetic who accepted so many natural objects as his *upagurus*, subsidiary teachers. From mother earth he learned the secret of patience, from air he learned detachment (as air remains unaffected by pleasant or bad odour), from the sky he learned freedom from all limitations, and so on.[22]

Many of you know how illumination came to Brother Lawrence, the seventeenth-century French mystic who spent his life in the kitchen of a monastery. The sight of a leafless tree in mid-winter stirred in him the reflection that leaves would be renewed, and flowers and fruits would appear on those bare branches. This revealed to him the presence and power of God lying hidden in all creation. The spiritual awakening that he then experienced sustained him throughout his life. In all of us the power of God is lying hidden, waiting for awakening. We have to discover the centre of divine Consciousness in us, and call forth the dormant power. It was this inner *guru* that Buddha asked his disciples to follow after his passing away. 'Be a lamp unto yourself (*Ātmadīpo bhava*)', he told them.

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[21] *The Eternal Companion,* op. cit. p. 251

[22] *Bhāgavatam,* 11.7.9

But we must take care lest we should deceive ourselves. We may think that our mind has become a good *guru*, that we are getting instructions everywhere, but there is always the danger of mistaking our own desires and thoughts for divine inspiration, divine Voice, etc. There is no such danger when we receive instruction from a living teacher who is spiritually advanced, and are guided by him. The human *guru* instructs his disciple to purify his soul by the practice of moral disciplines and selfless work. When the disciple errs, the *guru* notices it and brings him back to the right path. Those who are fortunate to have the guidance of a true human *guru* will not go astray. Gradually, through the *guru's* blessings, the hidden faculty of intuition will awaken in the disciple, and from there onwards his purified intuition will act as his *guru*. That is how one's own mind becomes one's *guru*.

Avatāra — the greatest Teacher

The greatest Teacher is, of course, the *avatāra*, the Divine Incarnation, who is able to bring illumination to thousands of people. Swami Vivekananda used to say that *avatāra* is a *kapāla-mocana,* one who can alter the destiny of people, one who can wipe out what is written on their foreheads, that is, their *karma.*[23] No ordinary teacher has such a power of transformation. Jesus had the power to bring divine Light to those simple fishermen who attained illumination at his touch. He also had the power to transform impure souls whom people call sinners. When he told them, 'Thy sins are forgiven; thy faith has made thee whole; go in peace', they at once felt freed from all impurities.

But Jesus himself passed through initiation. What else was that scene of baptism in Jordan when, we are told, the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon him and he heard a voice saying: 'This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased'. In modern times an increasingly large number of people regard Sri Ramakrishna as an Incarnation. He too received initiation from a human teacher. We are told that before he took up his work as priest in the Kālī temple, he was initiated by a Tāntric teacher (by name Kenaram Bhattacharya) of Calcutta.[24] When the teacher uttered the *mantra* in his ears, Ramakrishna gave a loud shout and was absorbed in ecstasy. The teacher said he had instructed many disciples but had never encountered anyone like Ramakrishna.

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[23] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1973), Vol. V, p. 324

The Master in his turn initiated his great disciple Narendranath with the name of Rāma, and the young man's spiritual emotions were stirred to great heights. For several hours he was absorbed in a state of ecstasy. Later on, this disciple in turn became a dynamo of spirituality — Swami Vivekananda. In 1892, the year before Vivekananda went to America, an agnostic professor in one of the colleges of Madras argued with him regarding the truths of religion. Vivekananda just touched him, and the doubter was instantly transformed. Later on, this man renounced the world and lived and died a saint.

Sri Ramakrishna had the power to raise others to great heights of higher consciousness by transmitting spiritual energy even by a mere look or wish. Swami Shivananda (Mahapurush Maharaj) has narrated his own experience as follows: 'One day I was meditating when the Master came near me. No sooner had he glanced at me than I burst into tears. He stood still without uttering a word. A sort of creeping sensation passed through me and I began to tremble all over. The Master congratulated me on attaining that state.'

Later in life Swami Shivananda himself, like many of his brother disciples, became a spiritual teacher of great power, as he was when we met him. This power manifested itself in him all the more when he became the head of the Order. About the year 1923 a spiritual seeker from Sind came to the

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[24] Cf. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1970), p. 134

Swami for initiation. The devotee had received a *mantra* in a dream but, as he could not understand its significance, his mind had become restless. Mahapurush Maharaj took him to the shrine room, initiated him, and asked him to meditate for a time. Then the Swami returned to his room with his face radiant and his mind overpowered by divine emotion, for he knew that something significant was happening in the shrine. The new disciple had a wonderful experience. The moment he received the holy Name, a new spiritual consciousness awakened in him, tears started rolling down his cheeks and he entered into deep meditation. When he returned to his *guru*, he related how through his grace his heart was filled with divine peace. He said that the *mantra* given to him during initiation was the same *mantra* he had received in his dream, but only then he understood what it signified. Mahapurush Maharaj then told him: 'My child, it is the Lord Himself who has blessed you today. He alone can show mercy to others. We are only instruments in His hands. The Lord manifests Himself in the heart of the *guru* and transmits spiritual power into the heart of the disciple. I have dedicated you to the Lord who has taken charge of your life and destiny.'[25]

The eternal Teacher

There is a saying that the human *guru* utters a *mantra* in the ears of a disciple, while the world Teacher speaks in the heart of the devotee. Real initiation takes place when God awakens the spiritual consciousness of a seeker. The real *guru* is the immanent God, the indwelling supreme Spirit who is 'the Goal, the Controller, the Lord, the Witness, the Abode, the Refuge, the Friend, the Origin and Dissolution of the universe, its Substratum, the Repository of all knowledge and the eternal Seed.'[26]

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[25] For more details see *For Seekers of God,* translated by Swami Vividishananda and Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1975), pp. 164-165.

[26] गतिर्भर्ता प्रभुः साक्षी निवासः शरणं सुहृत्।
प्रभवः प्रलयः स्थानं निधानं बीजमव्ययम्॥

Bhagavad-Gītā, 9.18

When the ordinary teacher and the pupil meet, each tries to see God in the other. The disciple looks upon the teacher as a visible manifestation of the supreme Spirit, the Teacher of all teachers, as a channel for the flow of divine Grace. It is in this spirit that he serves him, obeys him and worships him. The well-known verses repeated by thousands of people in India express this idea:

> I bow to the divine *guru* who, by the application of the collyrium of Knowledge, opens the eyes of one blinded by the disease of ignorance. I bow to the divine *guru* who imparts to the disciple the fire of Self-knowledge and burns away his bonds of *karma* accumulated through many births.[27]
>
> I offer my salutations to the beneficent Being who is incarnate in the *guru*, the Light of whose absolute Existence shines forth in the world of appearance, who instructs the disciples with the holy text, 'That thou art', realizing whom the soul nevermore returns to the ocean of birth and death.[28]

The Jīvātman, the individual Self, is interpenetrated and pervaded by the Paramātman, the supreme Self. But, owing to ignorance, the soul does not realize this truth. The purpose of initiation is to remove the veil of ignorance. Once this veil is lifted, the contact can be maintained through regular spiritual practice.

The old law of supply and demand is at work in spiritual life too. If a seeker feels a tremendous yearning for the light of Truth, that light must come to him from some source or other. Something happens to him, his heart opens to divine Grace, divine Light bursts upon him. And as he moves closer to the ultimate Reality, he sees the Light of the supreme Spirit shining in all beings. And when he becomes one with the supreme Spirit, the Teacher of all teachers, he too becomes a channel of divine Knowledge for others. He serves all beings knowing well that he is serving the Lord alone, the eternal Teacher who is teaching, awakening, illuminating and guiding souls throughout the ages.

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[27] अज्ञानतिमिरान्धस्य ज्ञानाञ्जनशलाकया। चक्षुरुन्मीलितं गेन तस्मै श्रीगुरवे नमः ॥
अनेकजन्मसंप्राप्तकर्मबन्धविदाहिने। आत्मज्ञानप्रदानेन तस्मै श्रीगुरवे नमः ॥

[28] यस्यैव स्फुरणं सदात्मकमसत्कल्पार्थकं भासते साक्षात्तत्त्वमसीति वेदवचसा यो बोधयत्याश्रितान्।
यत्साक्षात्करणाद्भवेन्न पुनरावृत्तिर्भवाम्भोनिधौ तस्मै श्रीगुरुमूर्तये नम इदं श्रीदक्षिणामूर्तये ॥
Śrī Śaṁkarācārya, *Dakṣiṇāmūrti-Stotram*, 3

CHAPTER 9

ASSOCIATION WITH THE WISE

Need for holy company

Association with wise and holy men is stressed in all religions and in all spiritual paths. And truly speaking, it is very essential for the spiritual growth of an aspirant. It is one of the most essential factors in the life of a beginner. In India the company of holy men has always been eagerly sought by all those who desire spiritual progress. What are the benefits of holy company? Regarding this there is an important discussion in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna:*

> A devotee: Then what is the way, Sir?
> Master: Prayer and the company of holy men. You cannot get rid of an ailment without the help of a physician. But it is not enough to be in the company of religious people only for a day. You should constantly seek it, for the disease has become chronic. Again you can't understand the pulse rightly unless you live with a physician. Moving with him constantly, you learn to distinguish between the pulse of phlegm and the pulse of bile.
> Devotee: What is the good of holy company?
> Master: It begets yearning for God. It begets love of God. Nothing whatsoever is achieved in spiritual life without yearning. By constantly living in the company of holy men, the soul becomes restless for God. . . . There is another benefit from holy company. It helps one to cultivate discrimination between the Real and the unreal. God alone is the Real, that is to say, the eternal Substance, and the world is unreal, that is to say, transitory.[1]

In other words, holy company fosters in us a spirit of renunciation. By living with holy men who have renounced everything, others learn the value of renunciation and acquire strength to practise it. There is a story about a Muslim saint who was one day visited by the Sultan. The emperor praised the ascetic's spirit of renunciation to which the saint replied: 'My renunciation? Why, yours is much greater. I have renounced only the world and its pleasures; whereas you have renounced God and all the heavenly pleasures!'

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[1] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda, (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), pp. 21-22

The question of right association is a very important one closely related to what Buddha called 'right mindfulness', and cannot be left out of account in the practice of Vedānta. It is not a question of haughty aloofness, of insensitiveness, of compassionlessness. On the contrary, it can be an act of perfect compassion, though outwardly one may not mix with certain people but just stand aside. Buddhism is a religion of compassion towards all life in spite of its exaltation of renunciation and monasticism.

Fellow-travellers can help one another. That is why holy company is of such great importance. There should be mutual help, mutual sympathy; because these help us in sustaining our energy and striving. We should never try to be teachers but should act as fellow students, giving others a helping hand if we can. This is always safe, if we know how to remain within reasonable limits. Then we do not become dangerous to ourselves and to others. Then egotism and superiority complex cannot sprout in us and harm us and others.

'O Mother, Thou art the Driver, and I am the machine.' This is the attitude we should adopt, and never that of superiority. Before you lead others, learn to serve them with dedication and in a spirit of self-surrender to the Lord. Very often, without proper training, we want to lead others. We want to have the fruit without paying the proper price for it.

The advantage of a small group of devotees is that in a small group there is greater uniformity of temperament, and hence all these direct instructions are applicable. It is easier to have a true spirit of sympathy without backbiting, in a small group, even if they are beginners. It is always better to have first intensive work and later on, extensive work. In every country we need a group of sincere individuals who strive for the highest ideal of perfect purity and devotion and service, who are prepared to give their all for this ideal, who are prepared to suffer anything for its realization. We cannot convert masses to spiritual life, however much we may wish to. But we can change the lives of a few sincere people whose time for a change has come.

Don't seek the company of fools

There is a well-known saying in Sanskrit: 'It is far better to roam in the forest with the hill tribes than to live with fools even in heaven.'[2]

If we cannot get the company of people who are good, pure, deeply spiritual and wise, during the period of our *sādhanā*, we need not seek fools, i.e. worldly-minded people, and be in their company. Their impure immoral vibrations affect us in our present state, though we may not know it and think nothing has happened. When some young disciples of Sri Ramakrishna complained to Swami Vivekananda at the Baranagore Math that as they had not yet succeeded in realizing God they had better go back to their families and live like householders, Swamiji replied: 'If I cannot find Rāma, should I go to Śyāmā (i.e. woman) for that reason? If I cannot realize God, does not mean that I should go back to the world? No, never!' This is the attitude everyone has to maintain. But ordinarily, people want somebody's company even if it is bad. They do not want to be alone. That is the whole trouble.

One sure sign of spiritual progress is that the devotee wants to hear and speak only of the Divine, and of spiritual matters. If we find that a devotee is fond of worldly company and worldly talk, there is something wrong with his devotion, and his sincerity is questionable. An external thing can attract me only when there is an inner consent or hankering for it in me. Birds of the same feather flock together because they have the same temperament. Those who are truly spiritual cannot relish the talk and company of worldly-minded people. Worldly-minded people are unwise though they may be very clever and intellectually developed; and the spiritual aspirant should see that he does not pass his time in the company of such fools. This is very very essential. I know why I am telling this to some of you again and again.

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[2] वरं पर्वतदुर्गेषु भ्रान्तं वनचरैः सह ।
न मूर्खजन संपर्कः सुरेन्द्रभुवनेष्वपि ॥

Bhartṛhari, *Nītiśatakam*, 14

Save yourself first

Have you seen some people going about busily 'saving' others? They are common only in the West. There are people who are always busy saving the souls of others from hell-fire. Do not think you have become saints and can associate with anybody you please. A Buddha, a Christ, a Ramakrishna can go to a sinner, be in the company of a sinner, and redeem him. Your case is different. You have not developed enough stamina even to redeem yourself. If you don't understand what I say, just go and try to reform sinners, and see what happens in your case. You should now busy yourself with your *sādhanā*. In the early stages of spiritual life you should not bother about anything other than your soul and God. Do your *sādhanā* steadily and intensely with a definite purpose. Devote more and more time to your *japa* and meditation and studies. Then if you advance in spiritual life sufficiently, you too may be able to help others spiritually.

Some people are more sensitive than others to the charms of the opposite sex. Some people respond more quickly than others to the temptations of the flesh. Such people must be extra careful in associating with others, in moving among the objects of temptation. Sri Ramakrishna had a disciple by name Latu who, before his meeting the Master, had spent his boyhood in the lower strata of society as a poor shepherd boy. He had been accustomed to seeing people drinking. After coming in contact with Sri Ramakrishna, young Latu happened to pass near a tavern, and this roused some of his old boyhood memories and disturbed his mind. Sri Ramakrishna, who could read other people's thoughts, immediately detected the cause and warned Latu against even going near a grog shop. The young man thenceforth avoided walking along not only the road where there was a bar but also several adjacent roads. He took instead long detours even though this meant much more walking and hardship. Is it any wonder he later on became one of the foremost of illumined souls? The saints are always so thorough-going in every aspect of their life.

Sometimes when walking through the streets I feel shocked when I see some people. There is so much lewdness and greed in their faces and even their vibrations hit me when I pass them. How careful we must be in dealing with such people!

There is a funny story about a tramp who saw something like a blanket floating by in a swollen river. He immediately jumped into the river, swam towards the object, and caught hold of it. But then he began to shriek for help. People on the bank shouted to him to leave his hold on the blanket and swim back. The tramp replied, 'I have left it but it does not leave me.' What he had mistaken for the blanket was a bear! That is what happens to us. We go after certain objects or people, and then find we cannot extricate ourselves from them.

No need to condemn others

The aspirant cannot mix with everybody indiscriminately but there should never be condemnation. You need not condemn impure people and develop a superiority complex. An I-am-holier-than-you attitude is bad indeed and it makes us over-confident and careless. But the spiritual aspirant must guard himself against impure people and their impure vibrations in order to protect himself. Unless we have advanced much and have developed enough spiritual power to transform others, it is not at all safe for us to associate with bad people. God is no doubt in all beings but certain manifestations of His are not safe for us in our present condition. Those manifestations of God must be saluted from a safe distance.

Now, what is to be done when on certain occasions we cannot avoid being in the company of bad people? You should not show contempt or indifference. Be wide-awake and raise a strong mental barrier within you. Protect yourself with an inner shield. Do vigorous self-analysis and try to keep out the bad impressions before they gain permanent lodgement within. A true spiritual aspirant always discriminates. It is a habit with him. You should always be in a mood to rush towards God. Follow the example of the baby kangaroo. When the baby kangaroo senses danger it jumps into its mother's pouch and is off. So also we must learn to run into the arms of the Divine whenever there is a danger.

The obstacle of egotism

The more we come to know of people with all their meanness, their greed, their crookedness and their lust, the less becomes our shallow optimism in the goodness of all. Then we run the risk of becoming pessimistic or cynical. This is a great danger. But fortunately for us, there are very good, pious and spiritual people too in this world. We should seek their company. Spiritual men should seek one another's company especially in the early days. It is necessary to compare notes with fellow-travellers in the spiritual path. Not only that, we should allow ourselves to be corrected by holy men. We resent being corrected by others. But we cannot detect all our weaknesses ourselves. When other people point out our mistakes we should accept that in the proper spirit.

The ego is a great obstacle in spiritual life. Only when we live in the company of holy men will we realize how egotistic we are. Holy company is a great antidote to egotism. That is why in India holy men have been accorded great veneration. Hindu Purāṇas are full of eulogies about holy association. Only those who have had the privilege of serving an illumined soul know the value of such service.

Sometimes in the course of our spiritual progress we are likely to develop a sort of unhealthy introversion. This is to be avoided by going in for holy association. When we are in a mood of depression, when we find it difficult to establish contact with the Divine, the company of spiritual souls and talks with them are of great help. People with morbid introversion want to avoid the company of even spiritual people. People with morbid extroversion seek the company of holy men just to gossip and kill time. Those who are of balanced nature enjoy the company of pure-souled spiritual aspirants, discuss spiritual matters with them and strengthen their own faith and spiritual fervour. Sri Ramakrishna always encouraged his disciples to meet one another.

Even when we associate ourselves with holy men we should remember that behind our human connections there is a divine connection, divine relationship. We should know that it is the Lord who dwells in all, who is the connecting link amongst us. We should always try to establish our relationship with others through the Divine. Sri Ramakrishna had boundless love for his disciples but that love was based on the realization of the oneness of humanity in God. One day he told his favourite disciple Narendra, 'I love you because I see Nārāyaṇa in you.' His was divine kinship free from any physical attachment.

Attitude towards one's Guru

They are indeed blessed who get the guidance of an illumined soul. However, it is not enough to come in contact with a *guru* and receive some instruction from him. You should follow his teachings with great faith. But you should not get too much attached to him emotionally and cling to his outer form. A true teacher wishes his disciples to love God more than himself and to look upon him only as an instrument of the Divine.

The real *Guru* who reveals to us the Truth is in our own heart, and he is no other than the Divine Himself. His message very often comes through some person, who also is called *guru.* So the Divine is sometimes called the *Guru* of *gurus.* We should not expect much from the outer *guru,* but should try to be in tune with the inner *Guru,* the Divine in us, the Soul of our souls, and draw knowledge and inspiration from Him. You may look upon your *Iṣṭam* (the Holy Personality appealing to you most) as the *Guru* of all *gurus.*

Both the teacher and the pupil should try to be as much impersonal as possible. This becomes possible if the teacher tries to see the Divine in the student, and the student also tries to feel the Divine in the teacher. One should try to think of the other not as a person but as a manifestation of the Principle, and oneself also as such. This is the beginning of practical Vedānta, and then in due course this ideal encompasses everything and every being.

The Lord comes to me in the form of devotees and I should try to see Him in them more than their personalities. The student also should recognize the divine Principle in the one who brings the message, and also in himself. It is then that the spiritual teaching becomes fruitful, and one is able to realize the same divine Presence in all.

The Guru cult in India

From time immemorial the *guru* or the spiritual teacher has been given the highest place of honour in India and elsewhere. The Hindu scriptures go to the length of saying that the *guru* is Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Maheśvara, nay, even the Paraṁ Brahman (the supreme Spirit) Itself.[3] Most people, however, forget that this has been said from the spiritual angle, and never from the physical point of view.

The trouble with most spiritual seekers is that they identify themselves with their own body and personality, and become devoted to a male or a female Deity, and remain stuck there. And if they have a spiritual teacher, they cling to the form and personality of the teacher also. This is nothing but materialism, though given a spiritual colour. However useful it may be in the beginning, this spiritual materialism must be transcended; but how to do it is the question.

As one advances in the spiritual path, one must come to realize that the worshipper is a soul, and the Deity that is worshipped is none other than the Paramātman Itself. The soul is, as it were, part of the Paramātman — the infinite Spirit, and the *guru* also in his true nature is a divine manifestation through whom flows divine Grace, Knowledge, Love and Bliss. The task before us is, how to realize this truth that the devotee, the *Iṣṭa Devatā*, and the *guru* are in reality manifestations of the same transcendental Spirit.

Before beginning our meditation, let us first consider the body as a temple. We may now enter this temple through the gateway of the heart and find that our heart is filled with the light and consciousness of the Jīvātman which is part of the Paramātman — the infinite Light and infinite Consciousness. Let us merge our body, mind and the whole world into this infinite Reality, and imagine that we are like a little sphere of light and consciousness, interpenetrated and permeated by the infinite Light and infinite Consciousness. Since this form of meditation is beyond the reach of ordinary people, let us think that our soul puts on a pure mental body and a pure physical body, and the Paramātman takes the form of the *guru* on one side, and of the *Iṣṭa Devatā* on the other. After saluting the *guru*, we should merge his personality in the *Iṣṭa Devatā*, and meditate on Him or Her, repeating the *Iṣṭa mantra*.

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[3] गुरुर्ब्रह्मा गुरुर्विष्णुः गुरुर्देवो महेश्वरः ।
गुरुरेव परं ब्रह्म तस्मै श्रीगुरवे नमः ॥
Skānda Purāṇa, 'Guru Gītā', 1.46

The first step is *rūpa dhyāna* — that is, to meditate on the entire luminous blissful form of the Deity. The next is *guṇa dhyāna* — that is, to meditate on the infinite good qualities of the Deity like infinite Purity, Knowledge, Love and Bliss. The third and the last stage is *svarūpa dhyāna* — that is, to meditate on the all-pervading Consciousness of which the Holy Personality, the *guru*, and the disciple are different manifestations. This infinite background should never be forgotten even during the previous stages of meditation.

The spiritual seeker should always remember that the idolizing of a human form and the blind worshipping of a human personality are stumbling blocks in spiritual progress, and are harmful to both the disciple and the *guru*. A true teacher is a free soul, and would very much like to see that all his disciples stand on their own feet, realize their divine nature, and solve their individual problems developing a cosmic outlook. If the disciples continue to cling to the *guru's* personality and look up to him for help and guidance at every step, he feels the drag, and regrets his inability to make them attain that spiritual strength and freedom which he himself enjoys. He will rather have one free soul as his disciple than a multitude of them following him blindly.

It is for this reason that the wise spiritual teacher deprecates the idea of blind personal service which is very common in India. Most of the disciples forget that the following of the ideal and living the life are much more important than attending on the *guru* in person.

We should so train ourselves that instead of depending too much on the outside teacher, we depend more and more on the indwelling *Guru*, and reach a state of spiritual consciousness which we must be able to maintain, whether the *guru* is alive in this world or has passed on, as Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna said, 'from this room to that room', meaning from the physical plane of consciousness to the subtle one.

This danger of falling into the rut of the *guru* cult can be avoided only by meditating on the formless infinite Spirit (in the aforesaid way) which is also infinite Knowledge, infinite Love and infinite Bliss. Again when we return to the plane of personality, we should stress more the Spirit, and not the form. In order to avoid self-deception, it is good to meditate on the infinite Spirit, merging all forms into It, and try to be established in the supreme Consciousness through repeated practice. This helps not only the student, but also the teacher towards the realization of perfect freedom and peace.

Blessings of illumined souls

Through holy association one's latent good *saṁskāras* are roused and the bad ones are checked. In the *Bhāgavatam* there is this famous statement:

> Holy sages are the greatest purifiers. Holy waters, etc. take a long time to purify the soul but contact with a holy man frees one from impurity in no time. And these holy men make the holy places holy, for they carry the divine Being in their hearts.[4]

It is said in the *Bhāgavatam* that the *gopīs* (milkmaids) of Brindāvan were at first ignorant of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's divine nature. They felt attracted by his physical beauty and longed to have him as their sweetheart. But contact with the divine Cowherd brought about a great transformation in them. They shed their carnality and came to cherish only pure love for Śrī Kṛṣṇa and in due course, by his grace, they attained spiritual illumination.[5]

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[4] *Bhāgavatam,* 10.48.31; 1.13.10

[5] ibid., 11.12.13

If you come into intimate contact with an illumined soul you should realize that God's grace has been showered on you. That grace may be taken away any day and perhaps for ever; some of you may not be given a second chance. The *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* says, 'A human birth, the longing for liberation, and the company of illumined teachers are extremely difficult to get except through God's grace.'[6]

The company of illumined souls is invaluable but difficult to get. You do not know the infinite love of the great ones. We ourselves have seen some of the children of Sri Ramakrishna incessantly busying themselves with our problems — how to help us, how to put us on the right way. There is no return for such love. It is marvellous. No one can ever repay them. It must ever remain unpaid. Only *this* is love — love that knows no bargaining, that asks nothing for itself, that only gives and gives, that never takes.

One day Sri Ramakrishna asked a rich man to help Naren (Vivekananda) because the latter was in great difficulties, and his family had nothing to eat. Naren became cross and asked his *guru*, 'Why do you talk about my personal affairs to others?' Sri Ramakrishna replied, 'My boy, do you not see that for your sake I would even go begging from door to door?' This is genuine love, and this we ourselves have seen many a time during our *sādhanā* in all the Master's children. Blessed is such love! There is an infinite difference between such love and ordinary worldly relationships which we call love, but which in reality is only self-seeking in some form or other. Real love is quite different. You can never understand it unless you come in contact with illumined souls.

God is the indwelling Spirit in all, but we have to realize this consciously and come in direct contact with Him. Then His power works through us. That is the case with the illumined souls. They can exert tremendous influence on others, something which ordinary people just cannot do. When Sri Ramakrishna touched Narendra, the young man immediately got superconscious experience. Later on

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[6] Śaṁkarācārya, *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 3 (See Chapter 1, footnote 3.)

Narendra too, as Swami Vivekananda, brought about changes in others. When he touched 'Kidi', then a young mathematics professor in Madras, the latter immediately underwent a transformation. His atheistic ideas vanished and he became a staunch follower of Swamiji and Vedānta. These holy men are like live electric wires which are connected to a power-house. They are always in conscious contact with the Divine. Their finite personalities are always in touch with the Infinite. When you touch a live wire you get a tremendous shock. When you touch these pure souls you touch the Lord ever present in them. That is the meaning of Christ's saying, 'And he that seeth me seeth him that sent me.'[7]

The Infinite, for its manifestation, has made a channel, as it were, through the mind and the body of holy men. Whoever comes in touch with a holy man, and is able to receive what he gives, comes in touch with the Infinite also. But the important point to note is that one should be able to receive, should have the capacity to feel the contact. Otherwise, as Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'The *sannyāsin's kamaṇḍalu* (waterpot made out of a large kind of bitter gourd) goes with him to all the places of pilgrimage, yet does not lose its bitter taste.'[8] When we approach holy men we should be in the right mood, open to receive their blessings. God may grant us the company of holy men but if we are not open, not ready to receive, nothing will happen to us. You must learn to make use of the company of holy people. You must know how to derive benefit from such contact. If you place perfect trust in a holy man and leave all your problems to him, he will do what is necessary for you. He will lead you along the right path. But in such a case your trust must be complete. You should not be a 'doubting Thomas'.

The company of your Chosen Deity

If you can remain in tune with the Divine always, no holy company may be necessary. Otherwise holy association is very, very necessary for spiritual progress.

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[7] *Bible,* St. John, 12:45 and 14:9

[8] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* op. cit., p. 87

But if you don't have the opportunity of holy company, what is to be done? Keep the company of your *Iṣṭa Devatā*, the Holy Personality on whom you meditate. Learn to talk to your *Iṣṭam*. Whenever you feel the need of holy company, think of the Lord and also repeat His name. He is the power behind us, and without Him we are nothing. He is the Soul of our souls. Try to have contact with this indwelling Spirit. When you travel, let your *Iṣṭa Devatā* accompany you seated in your heart. Let Him keep you company in your journey, and protect you from all harm and fill your heart with peace wherever you are. Do not forget Him under any circumstances.

In many people there seems to be an inherent fear of remaining alone. They always need a company of some sort or other. People are eager to talk to others and make others talk to them. The main cause of this tendency is the clinging to one's own little self. The ego is a complex bundle of ideas, memories and impulses, and therefore needs some kind of support. Ordinarily, people try to hold together the ego with the support of others. But those who have succeeded in integrating their personality from within do not need such external supports. The centre of gravity of the personality in their case lies wholly within. The higher Self is the best integrating power known to man. There is no need to run after this man and that man for one's peaceful existence.

Remain alone in peace. Only when you are alone do you feel the company of the Divine more clearly. Remain alone with the Divine. The Divine within is company enough for us all. There is a famous Sanskrit passage which says:

O Lord, Thou art my mother, Thou art my father;
Thou art my relative and my friend;
Thou art my learning and my wealth;
Thou art indeed my all.[9]

Remember Buddha's instruction: 'Roam about free and alone like the rhinoceros.' In the part of the *Bhāgavatam* called

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[9] See Swami Yatiswarananda, *Universal Prayers* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1977), verse 210.

'Uddhava Gītā' this idea is conveyed through the simple story of a maiden who had to receive some male guests in her house. There was no ready rice available for cooking and she started husking the paddy. But the bracelets on her wrist made a great noise, which she thought would betray her family's poverty. So she removed the bracelets one by one till only one was left on each arm. A wandering monk who observed all this learnt from this the following moral:

> Where many dwell there is quarrel, and even between two people there is a chance for talk. Therefore one should live alone like the bracelet of the maiden.[10]

When you are alone, sing to yourself this beautiful Bengali song which Sri Ramakrishna used to like much:

Thou art my All in All, O Lord! —
  the Life of my life, the Essence of essence;
In the three worlds I have none else
  but Thee to call my own.
Thou art my peace, my joy, my hope;
  Thou my support, my wealth, my glory;
Thou my wisdom and my strength.

Thou art my home, my place of rest;
  my dearest friend, my next of kin;
My present and my future, Thou; my
  heaven and my salvation.
Thou art my scriptures, my commandments;
  Thou art my ever-gracious *Guru*;
Thou the Spring of my boundless bliss.

Thou art the Way, and Thou the Goal;
  Thou the Adorable One, O Lord!
Thou art the Mother tender-hearted;
  Thou the chastising Father;
Thou the Creator and Protector;
  Thou the helmsman who dost steer
My craft across the sea of life.[11]

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[10] वासे बहूनां कलहो भवेद्वार्ता द्वयोरपि। एक एव चरेत्तस्मात्कुमार्या इव कङ्कणः ॥
Bhāgavatam, 11.9.10

[11] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., pp. 141,142

CHAPTER 10

RENUNCIATION AND DETACHMENT

Need for renunciation

It is really very strange that people suffer so much and still they do not come to their senses, but cling to all kinds of false identifications. The whole world is bound by the desire for wealth and sex. People make these the goal of their life and come to grief in the end. By identifying ourselves with our body and that of others we get into all kinds of emotional involvements, and create no end of misery. Of course, there are many people who seem to thrive on all these. As in the parable of Sri Ramakrishna, the camel eats thorny leaves and bleeds in its mouth but goes on eating them all the same.[1] But a spiritual aspirant cannot live like that. He has fixed for himself a higher goal and he cannot afford to be lost in worldly entanglements. He therefore begins to think deeply about renunciation and detachment.

Renunciation is the central theme of spiritual life in all religions. Renunciation of wealth and greed, of sex and lust, and of egotism — this threefold renunciation is invariably stressed in all scriptures and by all truly spiritual men. Without renunciation there is no spiritual life. And renunciation means not only outward renunciation, but also mental renunciation. We must renounce all our clinging to our own body and mind and to that of others, and become truly dispassionate and non-attached in every way. It is not enough if we do this with reference to only certain things and persons while trying to cling to others all the more. It is easier to avoid certain things or people whom we don't like and call it renunciation. True renunciation is a change of attitude towards all.

Why is renunciation necessary? Why should we practise so much dispassion and non-attachment? Spiritual practice can never be successfully performed without giving up all old associations with things and people which are not helpful to the aspirant. Only to the extent we are prepared to renounce our desires and passions and our clinging to others, either in affection or in aversion, can we practise true religion with profit, and can any progress be made. Never allow your mind to delude you on this point. The mind always tries to bring forward some plausible reason or other — that we cannot renounce this or that thing, that we should be in the company of such and such a person, that it is our duty to talk to him or her, etc. Never believe your mind in such cases. It is always out to deceive you and to become the spokesman of your subconscious or unconscious desires. So we need not only *japa*, prayer, meditation and other spiritual practices, but also renunciation. In fact, *japa* and meditation are effective only to the extent to which we succeed in having more and more true renunciation and non-attachment. When these two — spiritual practices and renunciation — are combined, it becomes possible for us to control the mind and begin cleaning all its dirty nooks and crannies where we have allowed all kinds of filth to accumulate for ages and ages through countless births.

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[1] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 118

Too much worldliness is like fire. It burns the heart. It makes one callous and insensitive to spiritual values. A worldly person cannot appreciate the joys of spiritual life. The faculty of intuition becomes so dull in a worldly person that he is no longer sensitive to higher vibrations. He has no idea of spiritual truths, and just goes on wallowing in the mire of his desires and passions.

Love and attachment

Things or persons whom we love, draw our minds and create attachment, hatred and aversion. Love and aversion are only obverse and reverse of the same coin; never make any mistake about this. So they come under the same category. Hatred or aversion is love or attachment turned upside down. It is not something essentially different. We must get rid of all forms of attachment and all forms of fear by becoming dispassionate and free from personal likes and dislikes. We must be kind without ever getting attached. There should never be any personal claim on anybody or anybody's love; nor should we allow anybody to have any personal claim on us or on our affection.

We must love God alone and allow others also to do the same. Christ says, 'He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me'[2]; and there is nothing truer than that. And it is also true that he who allows any other person to love him more than the Divine is not worthy of the Divine, and will never attain to the Divine, however hard he may try. We reap only what we sow, and so long as we go on allowing all these likes and dislikes fettering ourselves and others with the chains of so-called love, we shall remain bond-slaves, bringing misery to ourselves and to others. Misery is the penalty we pay for our attachments. In some cases it comes soon, in others late; but all have to pay for their folly.

When people love us, we feel flattered. We like being attractive to others, we like being loved by others as objects of enjoyment. But we are generally too impulsive and unreflective to know that we thereby only create troubles both for ourselves and for others and prevent our spiritual progress. We should be dignified and well guarded. We should adopt such an attitude that others do not dare to approach us in the wrong way. I am telling this especially to ladies. The western concept of chivalry has no place in spiritual life.

Devotees and spiritual aspirants are our own because we are all bound by the common chord of divine Love which is permanent. Love for one's spiritual brothers is far more intense and beneficial than worldly love. Look at the relationship that existed among the disciples of Christ, among the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. What tender love, mutual respect and consideration existed among them! When we as youngsters came in contact with the great disciples of Sri

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[2] *Bible,* St. Matthew, 10:37

Ramakrishna, we too were deeply drawn by the intense but pure and unselfish love they showered upon us. Only a spiritual man can have real love for others. The so-called love of worldly people is very often only refined self-interest.

Illumined souls love all people alike without getting attached to them because they have realized the truth of the famous Upaniṣadic statement:

> It is not for the sake of the husband that the husband is loved,
> but for the sake of the Self that the husband is loved.
> It is not for the sake of the wife that the wife is loved,
> but for the sake of the Self that the wife is loved.
> It is not for the sake of sons that sons are loved,
> but for the sake of the Self that sons are loved. . . .
> It is not for the sake of everything that everything is loved,
> but for the sake of the Self that everything is loved.[3]

The lives of illumined souls teach us that renunciation and detachment do not mean callousness or indifference. Callousness is not non-attachment; it is nothing but selfishness, clinging to one's own ego. Try to render help to others as much as lies within your power, taking all precautions to protect yourself from getting attached to them. If you cannot do this, pray to God for the welfare of others. If you pray sincerely and intensely, you will find help reaching those you want to help. But remember this, if you want to pray for others you should feel yourself close to God. If you cannot prevent yourself from getting attached to others, you had better not help them. You had better take recourse to prayer. In fact every sincere aspirant must include this kind of prayer for others in his daily spiritual practice.

During the period of transition from worldly life to spiritual life, we may feel a little indifferent towards others for the time being. In order to protect ourselves we may even cultivate an attitude of indifference, but only for a short time. If you hold to the ideal of God-realization and lead a pure life, you will find after some time your old love for others returning to you in a purified and sublimated form, in which only attachment has been eliminated and replaced by intense love for God. You then love others for the sake of the Divine and not for any selfish purpose. This alone is true love. We should steer clear of two dangers: one is to love others with human love and falsely call it 'divine', and the other is to be too indifferent to even the right feelings and be negligent of one's duties. Both are harmful to spiritual growth.

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[3] *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad,* 2.4.5; 4.5.6

True relatives

Who are our true kith and kin? *Bāndhavāḥ Śivabhaktāśca* ('devotees of Śiva are my relatives'), says Śaṃkara in one of his hymns.[4] Very often those whom we consider our near and dear ones are perfect strangers to us. They live on one thought plane, we on another. Those who are sincere spiritual aspirants and are eager to make quick spiritual progress should learn to live like strangers in their own homes. If your friends and relatives are good and spiritual, you may associate yourselves with them. But if they are worldly and unspiritual and also try to drag you down with them, the only way open to you is to part company with them. If you wish to go ahead and others want to lie down, what else can you do?

Those who live with relatives who are worldly and unspiritual should live like guests in a guest-house. They must give up the idea of ownership and bring in the idea of trusteeship. You should never raise any emotional claim on others. They are not your property. If you possess anything you must possess it as a trustee, not as the owner, and administer it on behalf of the Lord.

Learn to develop the true perspective with regard to your family. Free the mind from all old associations connected with purely human forms of love and aversion, connected with attachment and sex; only then will true spiritual practice become possible. Everything before that is just an attempt at spiritual practice and nothing more. As a boy I was awfully sentimental. I used to become terribly attached to people just after one or two days' contact. I also found myself overwhelmed by all the love and affection shown me by my parents, relations and friends, and used to think a lot about them. At last I could stand all these feelings no longer and firmly said to myself: 'This has got to be changed.' I then turned to the Impersonal more and more. The thought of the supreme Spirit dwelling in all beings alone can loosen us from our clinging to people. You must think this thought so intensely that it becomes a reality to you, something which is vivid and permanent. It should sustain you even when all your thoughts about other people burst like bubbles sooner or later.

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[4] *Annapūrṇāstotram*, verse 12

Hatred is as bad as attachment

Hatred is as bad as attachment, in fact it is the same thing. Attachment and hatred are but the two sides of the same coin, as I said before. Never delude yourself into thinking that one is better than the other. Both are fetters and degrade the human being, preventing him from rising to his true stature. Both must be renounced.

Let us take the question of anger. Why are we angry? Only because someone or something is standing in the way of what we think to be the object of our enjoyment. This is the only reason for all our anger. Always we find that anger is closely connected with an overstressed ego or a strong sense of personality. Without this strong sense of the ego and an inordinate desire for enjoyment, physical and mental, anger could never even rise in our hearts. So this ego, this desire for enjoyment, is the only cause of our becoming angry. If we do not desire any enjoyment, if we do not expect anything from anybody but just give and act without ever expecting any return, there can never be any rise of anger. So we should get angry with our anger, and not with others. We should get terribly angry with our desires for sense enjoyment, and not with the objects as such. The only practical way is to sublimate anger and eventually eliminate it. And without eliminating anger and other associated evils to a great extent, we can never make any progress in spiritual life. Lust and anger are the two greatest enemies in the spiritual path. So they should be carefully avoided by all aspirants.

Thus, wherever there is anger there is some attachment or other, some inordinate desire or affection. Truly speaking, without attachment to some person or thing there can never rise any form of anger. It is only our thwarted will to enjoy that brings about anger. But this should be understood more in a subtle sense than in a gross one. It need not necessarily be any craving for the grosser forms of enjoyment that lies at the root of anger.

Some people become aggressive when they practise renunciation. This is because when the pull of attachment is reduced, the pull of hatred becomes stronger. Many spiritual aspirants become easily irritable and short-tempered in the early stages of *sādhanā*. This is a reaction to the half-hearted attempts at renunciation they make. External renunciation is not always followed by internal detachment. Internal attachment conflicts with outer renunciation and leads to tensions. True renunciation must be renunciation of attachment and hatred.

Only when we start practising true renunciation do we realize what sort of wretched life we were living till then. We also realize that it is the hold of the past that is now the greatest obstacle. This leads to remorse and repentance. There may be an amount of healthy and manly self-criticism but it should never become destructive or end in negative emotionalism. Don't say, 'Oh what a sinner, what a despicable creature, I am!' but learn to say, 'If I did wrong in the past, it is over. Let me know that I have done wrong, but let me not brood over it. Let me turn over a new leaf and do better in future; let me be more wide-awake in future and learn to be a human being instead of being an animal.' That is the proper way. Whether we are young or old, we must all be reborn in the world of the spirit and begin our march towards the Truth.

Be careful in the beginning

In the beginning, spiritual practice produces both good and bad results. When you go and water the garden nicely you will get fine fragrant roses, but at the same time weeds too will grow in abundance. So you will have to do a lot of weeding and cutting and uprooting. Renunciation is a continual process of clearing the jungle within.

Sometimes we get in our hearts a little fire of renunciation, but then we again dump the dripping rubbish of worldliness on it until this fire becomes extinguished. Love for the world extinguishes the little feeling or zeal for the Divine we have. This fire of renunciation and dispassion must be constantly stoked, as there is every chance of its being extinguished by bad physical and mental associations and all the outgoing tendencies of our impure mind. In the beginning, dispassion is a tender plant which must be hedged round and protected from all strong gusts of wind and frost; otherwise it can never grow into a sturdy tree which no storm can shake. When we become free from all personal relations and reactions and attachments, we succeed in making the great fire of renunciation within us and thus become free from the world.

We have lost the capacity to think in a dispassionate and consistent manner because, instead of making our minds pure and clear, we have been filling them with all sorts of useless and impure thoughts. Our minds are in a state of chaos and so we always feel a gnawing dissatisfaction. We have very many ideas, even good ideas, but we have not the capacity of thinking them in a definite order and in a detached and dispassionate way. Very often we go on thinking the same thought time and again, but all this is useless. If you want the mind to be controlled, you must go through a series of disciplines. In the beginning, have fixed hours for your spiritual practice and lead a secluded life as far as you can. Do not mix with other people indiscriminately. First rid yourself of the too many different thought currents which are neutralizing one another in your mind. Otherwise, you can never maintain a balanced and dispassionate state of mind. Dispassion, true dispassion, is so very necessary for spiritual progress. We have to face things as they are, and not as we would wish to have them.

True renunciation means love of God

In spiritual life renunciation and dispassion must go hand in hand with love of God. Intensification of the former without intensification of the latter is what makes spiritual life so difficult to many people. Renunciation, if accompanied by intense love of God, makes spiritual life a most joyful adventure. Divine love fulfils everything. So, for one who loves God sincerely, there is, really speaking, no giving up but fulfilment. Real love for God finds its expression in love for man in general without loving any particular individuals. If we develop this new outlook, our life will change altogether because this new outlook breaks down all barriers and snaps all bonds. It is the tendency of work to bind and fetter the soul in every way. But if we offer all the fruits of our work to the Lord, this very work will break down all the barriers and destroy all bondage. Then we will become only instruments in His hands, and know ourselves to be not the agents of our actions. We must find room for the Divine in the monastery, in the world, and above all, in our hearts.

True renunciation thus means filling the heart with the Divine always. Usually we find our mind is burdened with desires and passions, and to the extent we are able to rid ourselves of this load, to that extent we feel more of the divine Light within. We should try to shift the centre of consciousness from ourselves to God, and then we will find we and everyone else have a place in God.

False hopes — the story of Piṅgalā

In the *Bhāgavatam* there is the story of Piṅgalā, a courtesan who was very greedy for wealth. One day, however, she was disappointed as nobody turned up to meet her.

> When through this expectation of money her countenance sank and she was very much down in spirits, then as a result of this brooding an utter disgust came over her that made her happy.[5]

She was really a very fortunate woman. Very few people come to their senses like her. They just go on repeating the same mistakes and have the same dirty experiences over and over again, driven by the same old impressions. My *guru*, Swami Brahmananda, once said:

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[5] *Bhāgavatam*, 11.8.27

> There are three classes of people. The first class learn through just seeing the mistakes and experiences of others, and avoid getting into trouble. Those who learn a lesson after themselves committing a mistake or going through an experience, belong to the mediocre class. The worst type are those who never learn anything even after repeated experiences and mistakes.

Do not have any hopes for anything worldly, have only hopes for the Divine. It is the Divine alone that brings happiness to the soul. We should feel a sort of disgust at everything sensual. That is the first sign of our real dispassion for the things of the world. And without this dispassion for sense objects and their enjoyment, gross and subtle, no spiritual life, no higher endeavour, becomes possible. Dispassion should become our dominant trait if we want to achieve success in spiritual life.

Really speaking, we are living on desires and hopes — and false hopes at that. That brings only misery, bondage, and slavery to the senses. By giving up hopes we feel happy. We should see that our only hope is connected with the Divine. All other hopes connected with our impulses and desires should be given up. Usually our hopes are dependent on our desires and on others. We do not centre our hopes on the Divine.

God is immanent in us as the Soul of our souls. But we do not care for Him and try to depend on others. God is the source of all bliss. Outside objects only reflect a little of this immeasurable divine Bliss. Running after external objects means running after reflections and shadows.

In the *Mahābhārata*, there is the story of a king by name Yayāti. As a result of a curse he suddenly became an old man when he was in the prime of youth. But he borrowed the youth of his son and enjoyed sense pleasures for several hundred years. Even at the end of such a long period he found that his craving for sense enjoyment had not abated. He then came to the following conclusion:

> Verily, this desire for enjoyment never becomes satisfied through enjoyment. The desires go on increasing and become

more and more intense as is the case of fire when clarified butter is poured into it.[6]

The spirit of renunciation must come to us one day or other. It may not come to all with the suddenness that characterized Piṅgalā's change. But we must not be as stupid as Yayāti and wait for all our desires to get satisfied. Detachment must become our dominant trait if we wish to gain anything from spiritual life. So many impulses rise in us owing to our previous experiences, but that is no reason why we should give way to them helplessly. We must and can put them down, though this may mean a life of great strain and inner conflict for some time. We must call a halt to our impulsive life some day or other. Why not now?

We should be very clear about what we are really doing, and should always see that we do not follow the subtle impulses and desires driving us to do things we ought to avoid. If we want to associate with people, we should see why they attract us. If we want to do anything, we should know why we want to do it — the real motive behind our wish. We should find out the root-cause of our desires and annihilate it then and there. All harmful ideas and associations, everything that is not favourable to our spiritual growth should be eliminated. True dispassion, renunciation, is a common factor in all forms of spiritual discipline. And without this we cannot make much out of our spiritual striving.

It may take time, but the spirit of renunciation should be there before spiritual life can begin. There should be a true desire and longing for purity. That is the minimum prerequisite for starting the spiritual life. This means great strain. One has to struggle hard to control the senses and the impulses. But this early phase must be passed through by every aspirant on his way to the goal. The spirit of renunciation is the very basis of all true spiritual striving. Without this spirit of dispassion, we had better not even think of spiritual life. It will be wiser for us to take up something else as a pastime.

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[6] न जातु कामः कामानामुपभोगेन शाम्यति ।
हविषा कृष्णवर्त्मेव भूय एवाभिवर्धते ॥
The story of Yayāti occurs in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavatam*. The above passage is found in the *Bhāgavatam*, 9.19.4 and also in *Manu Smṛti*, 2.94.

The feeling of disgust

Disgust is the first reaction to worldly pleasures when one realizes one's mistake in life. The disgust that Piṅgalā felt for her own body is the first reaction that comes to one at the end of one's worldly life. This indicates a more complete transformation than that produced by mere sin consciousness. A man who broods over his sins may still be clinging to them. But the feeling of disgust turns one instantly from worldly life to spiritual life. One who turns to spiritual life must be able to say to himself like Piṅgalā:

> Who but myself should make much of this body which consists of bony structures such as the spine, ribs and limbs (like the ridgepole, rafters and posts of a house), and is covered over with skin, hair and nails, with its nine doors of secretion, and full of filthy stuff?[7]

We can find out whether we have turned to spiritual life by the disgust we feel for our body. If we have that feeling, other bodies — male or female — will no longer attract us. They will no longer act as pitfalls on our spiritual path. In his *Yoga-Sūtra*, Patañjali says:

> When one practises purity, both external and internal, there arises aversion to one's body and disgust for coming in touch with other bodies.[8]

As we become more and more introspective, our mind becomes something like a mental X-ray and we gain a deep insight into life as it is lived all around us. First comes the feeling of disgust. This is followed by the awareness of the glory of the Ātman standing behind all the filth and dirt that constitute the human body. The real experience of the Ātman comes much later but one can grasp the principle even in the early stage.

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[7] *Bhāgavatam*, 11.8.33

[8] शौचात्स्वाङ्गजुगुप्सा परैरसंसर्गः ।
Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra*, 2.40

It is not enough to have intellectual ideas. We should be able to react emotionally also. We should really feel utter disgust for worldly pleasures. We should be able to realize with Bhartṛhari:

> Enjoyments have not been enjoyed, but we have been eaten up; religious austerities have not been performed but we have become scorched; time has not vanished but we are vanishing; desires have not worn out, but we are wearing out.[9]

Examples of saints

The lives of saints teach us how to practise dispassion. Take the case of Lāla Bāba, a well-known nineteenth-century Vaiṣṇava saint of Bengal. Until he was well past middle age he had led a fast life. Then one day as he was returning home he overheard a small girl, the daughter of a washerman, telling her father: 'Father, it is getting late. When will you set fire to *vāsanā*?' The word *vāsanā* has a double meaning in the Bengali language. It means the sheaths of banana plant which are dried and burnt to get the ash formerly used by washermen in place of soap. It also means the latent mental impressions or *saṁskāras*. Lāla Bāba understood the word in the second sense. He suddenly realized that he was getting old, he had not yet destroyed his old impure *saṁskāras*. Then and there he renounced the world.

Tulsīdās, the great poet-saint of North India, before he turned to spiritual life had been very much attached to his wife. So strong was his infatuation that when his wife once went to visit her parents, he could not bear the separation even for a day. That very night he ran to her presence. Then his wife chided him and said, 'If only you loved God with as much passionate attachment as you have for my body, you would have indeed realized Him.' Those words shattered the veil of

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[९] भोगा न भुक्ता वयमेव भुक्तास्तपो न तप्तं वयमेव तप्ताः ।
कालो न यातो वयमेव यातास्तृष्णा न जीर्णा वयमेव जीर्णाः ॥

Bhartṛhari, *Vairāgya Śatakam*, 7

ignorance covering his soul, and Tulsīdās forthwith renounced everything including his wife, and took to the spiritual path.

Types of renunciation

We should try to bring into our lives something of the intensity of dispassion and compassion we find in the lives of saints. Cases of such sudden and complete renunciation as we have described above are rare. Most of the people practise only temporary renunciation even after receiving heavy blows in life. Many of them get entangled afterwards in 'woman and gold' all the more, and become human puppets in the puppet-show of human love. Then they say, 'Oh, we know what spiritual life is. We ourselves followed it for some time. But it is not worth all the trouble you take. Worldly life with all these human relations is better. We are meant for each other.' All this talk is only a sign of a weak and muddled brain.

There are three kinds of renunciation:

1. The false renunciation of a person who outwardly gives up action but inwardly possesses tremendous yearning for worldly objects and pleasures.
2. The sincere renunciation of a true spiritual aspirant who maintains his renunciation with an effort of the will but who has not yet been blessed with the vision of Truth.
3. The true renunciation of the man of realization in whom all conflicts and tensions have been set at rest for ever.

There is a well-known passage which says:

> In enjoyment there is the fear of illness, in social position there is the fear of calumny, in wealth there is the fear of losing it, in fame there is the fear of humiliation, in strength there is the fear of enemies, in beauty there is the fear of old age, in scholarship there is the fear of disputants, in virtue there is the fear of traducers, in life there is the fear of death. Indeed, everything in this world is accompanied by fear. Renunciation alone leads to fearlessness.[10]

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[10] भोगे रोगभयं कुले च्युतिभयं वित्ते नृपालाद्भयं
माने दैन्यभयं बले रिपुभयं रूपे जराया भयम्।
शास्त्रे वादिभयं गुणे खलभयं काये कृतान्ताद्भयं
सर्वं वस्तु भयान्वितं भुवि नृणां वैराग्यमेवाभयम्॥
ibid., 31

Inner detachment

Simply by giving up this world physically we cannot become pure in thought, word and deed all of a sudden. First avoid bad actions, and then bad thoughts, though the second is more difficult than the first. It is easier to give up a bad habit than a bad thought. The greatest difficulty lies in attaining purity of thought. This is the case so long as we remain on the plane of relative morality in which both good and evil are realities — but we try to avoid the evil and bring in the good. Owing to old tendencies and impressions, the evil wants to slip in and sometimes succeeds in coming in. With an effort of the will, we have got to replace it by good thoughts. This tug-of-war is inevitable in every case. Only, as we advance, the struggle becomes subtler and subtler, and having risen above the plane of gross and crude forms of good and evil, we have to deal with their subtler forms.

The company of bad friends may be given up very easily. We may easily avoid worldly company and worldly talk, but the internal company of our former worldly friends and impure thoughts connected with them is far more difficult to shake off and far more troublesome. What is to be done then? This 'inner' company of our discarded friends is more dangerous than the actual external company. First of all, cut yourself away resolutely from all old associations and avoid getting fresh stimuli from the external world. Then do some self-analysis. Find out the ways in which old memories occur in your mind. Through relentless discrimination detach yourself from all old images. Constantly give powerful suggestions to your mind and convince it of the wretchedness of the life of attachment and hatred. Go on removing all the old dirt and be careful not to accumulate fresh dirt. Gradually you will find your mind becoming clearer and stronger.

During all these struggles both on gross and subtler planes we should try to dwell on the holy thought (i.e. the name and form of our Chosen Deity) as much as possible and thus drive away the unholy ones. But sometimes the imagination grows morbid and unholy pictures become very vivid in spite of ourselves. In such a case, while repeating the holy *mantra* we should take the position of a witness or a spectator towards the evil thoughts and detach ourselves from their tangle. During the moments of forgetfulness we may identify ourselves with evil thoughts and feel affected both mentally and physically, but without doing any bad action. However, as we become more and more watchful and practise non-identification, we can keep them at a distance even before they make their appearance before us. This higher form of detachment, the interior detachment of the Self, is a great help to spiritual aspirants. When they actually get a real spiritual experience this detachment becomes spontaneous.

Under certain circumstances it is not possible to prevent the rising of a bad thought, but through practice one can look upon it as one would in the case of a mirage, the unreal nature of which one has already found out. The phenomenon cannot be altogether stopped, but it may be seen just as a phenomenon, something having the semblance of reality but unreal in its true nature.

And in order to realize the unreality of the phenomenon of names and forms, and our false relationship with it, we must try to see the Divine standing behind it. As we succeed in recognizing the divine principle at the back of all physical forms, we will be able to remain really unaffected by them. If in the course of the struggle we cannot help feeling more or less affected by them, we should not brood over the lapse, but try to think of the Divine as much as possible.

The tree of Saṁsāra

Hindu scriptures compare this world to a tree. This is an ancient imagery — the phenomenal world as a tree — the tree of *saṁsāra*. The *Bhāgavatam* describes it as follows:

> It has got two seeds, a hundred roots, three trunks; five main branches and eleven secondary branches; it exudes five kinds of sap; it has the nests of two birds on it; it reaches up to the

sun, has three layers of bark, and produces two kinds of fruit.[11]

The tree referred to here may stand for the microcosm or the macrocosm. If one is able to get a correct understanding of what the tree is, one can get out of it. There must be a correct view of ourselves and also of the world. The tree grows out of the vast substratum of divine Power. The mind must be raised to higher centres to discover the contact between the individual and the Cosmic.

The roots of the tree stand for our innumerable desires and impulses. The root-cause of all our troubles lies in these desires, this clinging to our individuality, this thirst for the pleasures of the senses. Devotion and selfless service enable us to get out of the tangle of these roots.

If all the roots were cut, the tree itself should fall. But this seldom happens. We are able to destroy only a part of our desires at the most. The tree survives with the help of the remaining roots. It is not so easy to cut off all the roots of desire.

But we need not feel depressed. If our spiritual practice reveals more and more of our lower nature, if it exposes more and more of the roots of desire, we should not feel discouraged. There are lots of bad memories and instincts lying buried deep in the subconscious mind. They have been there for quite a long time without our knowledge. If they sometimes start coming up, we should be happy that we have discovered them. We should realize the real situation within us and calmly and sanely find a solution to all our troubles. On the contrary, if we try to hide those thoughts and just pretend that they do not exist, we will only deceive ourselves. And we impede our spiritual progress. It is very difficult to be perfectly frank with oneself. But, indeed, frankness is always an indication of our growth. If we do not like to acknowledge our faults even to ourselves, how are we going to have the courage to face the problems of life? Keeping things hidden in the subconscious mind is not the solution to the problem, but we fool ourselves by thinking it is so.

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[11] *Bhāgavatam,* 11.12.22
The two seeds referred to in the verse are virtue and vice. The roots are the innumerable desires. The trunks are *sattva, rajas* and *tamas.* The main branches are the five elements (earth, water, air, fire and ether), and the eleven secondary branches are the organs plus *manas.* The saps are the five sense objects. The two birds are the Jīvātman and the Paramātman. The layers of bark refer to the nervous, bilious and lymphatic temperaments. The two fruits are happiness and misery.

The practice of confession in Christianity partly solves this problem of emptying the subconscious of its contents. But this is not always successful as the power of introspection is poorly developed in most of the people owing to lack of spiritual discipline. Moreover, the theological overtones connected with the custom often have a negative influence.

Another method is to place before the Divine the contents of the subconscious mind as they bubble up. You may pray to God intensely to enable you to get rid of your old impressions. Prayer can act as a powerful means for clearing the subconscious. Don't be frightened by the lower thoughts coming up in you. Offer them to the Divine just as you offer everything else. Of course, this is possible only for those who have tremendous faith in the Lord.

There is another method, perhaps the best one. And that is to stand as a witness of everything that comes up, however awful it may be. We can never really get rid of a bad impulse or feeling without first recognizing it, without first acknowledging its presence. What does it matter if there are hundreds of impure ideas lying submerged in our mind? What is more important is to keep yourself unattached to them. It is only when our conscious self gets connected to them that they really belong to us and give us trouble. But knowing that the Self is pure and unattached, we can remain as a witness and be unaffected by impure thoughts. This is a great help to the aspirant. Think more of your real nature and cease to identify yourself with your thoughts — whether good or bad. Gradually you will be able to transcend your thoughts and remain as the Self.

The axe of knowledge

We referred to the tree of *saṁsāra* in the *Bhāgavatam*.

How can we cut it down? Śrī Kṛṣṇa tells Uddhava how to do this:

> Thus, being steady and watchful, with the axe of knowledge sharpened by the service of the *guru* with one-pointed devotion, cut asunder this tree of *saṁsāra* rooted in the soul; and then, being identified with the Self, lay down your weapon.[12]

The axe of knowledge is the power of discrimination of the mind. With a blunt weapon, with an obtuse mind, nothing can be obtained. You will never be able to cut down this tree of *saṁsāra* with a dull, lazy mind. Only if the mind is kept sharp and alert through constant struggle can you start the cutting-down process. This takes time, a long time. The weapon cannot be laid down until one has realized one's true Self and has ceased to identify oneself with the mind.

Many people make an attempt to follow the spiritual life. But few are willing to bear its cross. That is the whole trouble. Listen to the voice of Swami Vivekananda echoing the call of the ancient sages of world-religions:

> Do not wait to have a harp and rest by degrees. Why not take a harp and begin here? Why wait for heaven? Make it here. In heaven there is no marrying or giving in marriage; why not begin at once and have none here? The yellow robe of the *sannyāsin* is the sign of the free. Give up the beggar's dress of the world; wear the flag of freedom, the ochre robe. . . . Sacrifice on God's altar earth's purest and best. He who struggles is better than he who never attempts. Even to look on one who has given up, has a purifying effect. Stand up for God; let the world go. Have no compromise. Give up the world, then alone you are loosened from the body. When it dies, you are free. Be free. Death alone can never free us. Freedom must be attained by our own efforts during life; then, when the body falls, there will be no rebirth for the free. . . . 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' This sentence alone would save mankind, if all books and prophets were lost. This purity of heart will bring the vision of God. It is the theme of the whole music of the universe. In purity there is no bondage. Remove the veils of ignorance by purity, then we manifest ourselves as

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[12] ibid., 11.12.24

we really are and know that we were never in bondage. The seeing of many is the great sin of all the world. See all as Self and love all; let all ideas of separateness go.[13]

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[13] 'Inspired Talks', *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), Vol. VII, pp. 93, 101, 103

CHAPTER 11

PURITY OF MIND — A FUNDAMENTAL NEED IN SPIRITUAL LIFE

Be wide-awake

Always try to follow the moral path, the spiritual path. There are people who have no sense of impurity; the more they commit wrong the more they become callous. All their moral sensitiveness is destroyed. They have no sense of shame. But a true aspirant is highly sensitive to the moral sense. Vyāsa in his commentary on Patañjali's *Yoga-Sūtras* compares the mind of a *yogī* to the eye-ball. Just as the cornea reacts immediately to even a speck of dust that falls on it, so the mind of a *Yogī* reacts strongly to the slightest thing that causes sorrow.[1] Without such a sensitive and alert mind spiritual life is likely to end up in a disastrous failure. Purity of mind is inseparable from spiritual life. If you see people pretending to be spiritual while leading impure lives, keep away from them. Do not believe the claims of impure people regarding spiritual experiences.

> Through purity of food comes purity of mind, through purity of mind comes a steady memory of Truth, and when one gets this memory one becomes free from all knots of the heart.[2]

Only a pure mind can think of Brahman in an unbroken stream. In the above passage the word 'food' means everything that comes in contact with the senses. We must have pure food for the eye, the ear, the organs of touch, smell etc.[3] Taking pure physical food for the stomach without purifying all other foods taken in by the senses is of no use. 'Blessed is he who feels longing for God, though he eats pork. But shame on him whose mind dwells on 'woman and gold', though he eats the purest food . . .'[4] — this is what Sri Ramakrishna used to say. Even if we are very careful we find in the course of the day we gather at least some dirt. You will be astonished to find how much dirt has accumulated in all the nooks and corners of your mind, and what a lot of cleaning is needed before you can successfully proceed on your spiritual path. This may be in a very subtle form, as some deep impressions that are harmful to spiritual life are. Never make light of the company you are in, of the talk you are having. Stop all gossiping, all idle, random thinking, all random activity. All these are very harmful to a spiritual aspirant. So, make it a point to use the utmost discrimination in all this. Do not go and accumulate new dirt through new worldly associations. In the course of the day you should act in such a manner that you would be able to undo the harm that is done. Through pure actions and thoughts you should accumulate enough merit to counter the demerits you have acquired. Later on, the whole account of merit and demerit is to be made nothing. But, at first, there must be a balancing of the account; both merit and demerit must be squared up so that the balance is nil. You must close your old account. You must put a stop to your old life. There should be no craving for fresh worldly company and worldly talk and amusements. The whole spiritual life lies in this fearless adjustment. Today, with you all, it is all a minus balance, and now you must earn spiritual merit sufficiently so as to square up the account. Only then a new account may be begun. Spiritual life means opening a new account.

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[1] Vyāsa's commentary on Patañjali's *Yoga-Sūtras*, 2.16

[2] आहारशुद्धौ सत्वशुद्धिः सत्वशुद्धौ ध्रुवा स्मृतिः ।
स्मृतिलम्भे सर्वग्रन्थीनां विप्रमोक्षः ॥
Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 7.26.2

[3] See Śaṁkara's commentary on ibid.

Again, our mind may be compared to a camera-cum-projector. If we could project picture after picture that lies hidden in it, what a nice cinema show would that make! Everything gets recorded, mercilessly, and very often we would shudder if we could see all that lies hidden in the depths of our mind, all the impressions that are quite unknown to us, that we have taken in semi-consciously or subconsciously; these are bound to rise sooner or later during our *sādhanā*. The semi-conscious thinking along impure and evil lines is a very dangerous thing, and may create very great trouble as it makes the impressions all the more deep and lasting. We should always be wide-awake. One day you will realize how true all this is. You should be very, very careful about what impressions you allow yourselves to take in and what talk you indulge in or listen to. Never think there is no danger in them simply because you do not feel that any impression is being made. The impression will come up later, and then you will not know what to do with it. Never dwell on old impressions, on old associations, on old worldly company and thoughts, not even subconsciously or semi-consciously. First of all, there must be a change in our outlook and attitude, and then must follow intense thinking along new lines, new good associations, new good and pure thoughts and ideas. Be as wide-awake and as fully conscious as possible, always, under all circumstances, so as not to take in bad impressions either through the eye, or through the ear. And if you do take them in, root them out immediately. Use your utmost discrimination regarding the company you allow yourself to be in and the things you allow yourself to hear and read.

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[4] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda, (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 525

Purity stressed in all spiritual paths

Even for Karma-yoga strict fulfilment of ethical rules is absolutely necessary, just as necessary as for the other three Yogas. There is a popular notion that ethical disciplines are to be followed only in Jñāna-yoga, Bhakti-yoga and Rāja-yoga, and that Karma-yoga is very easy because it allows you to live anyway you like. This is absurd. Without continence, non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, non-hatred, nothing can be really attained even in Karma-yoga. Purity is the *sine qua non* of every spiritual path the world knows. And purity means so much. It includes purity of body, senses, mind and heart. *Brahmacarya* is not only physical chastity; non-violence is not only physical non-violence; non-stealing is not only the avoidance of the gross forms of theft. These mean total inner purity also. If you do not fulfil all these preliminary disciplines with great singleness of purpose, allowing nothing whatsoever to deviate you from the path, sacrificing everything unconditionally to your ideal, you may be doing *karma*, works, it is true, but it does not become a Yoga. This is the great difference: everyone is doing *karma* but few do real Karma-yoga. For any form of Yoga the fulfilment of moral rules is necessary. Do not deceive yourself on this point. And this fulfilment means the fulfilment of these conditions not only in their gross, outward, physical forms, but even in their subtlest aspects.

Jñāna-yoga says: Concentrate your whole mind on Brahman after you have strictly gone through the purificatory disciplines. Always practise discrimination in order to purify your mind.

Karma-yoga says: Purify your mind through the strictest observation of ethical culture and through selfless actions, surrendering all their fruits to the Divine.

Bhakti-yoga says: Direct all your feelings and sensations of love only to the Divine. Let all other feelings of love be absorbed by the burning love for God. Annihilate them all through the intensity of that devotion, so that only this love for God remains.

Thus, we see that the basic common theme of all the Yogas is the purification of heart and cutting the bonds of attachment.

In doing work one great danger is that we may think too much of the fruits, and this may make us restless. But if we know that the goal is perfect non-attachment and purity, we shall not bother about the fruits, and restlessness of mind will not overpower us. When the spiritual aspirant comes to know that the purpose of work is the purification of mind which is essential for his own spiritual progress, he will do all work with greater faith and enthusiasm. Then alone does work become Karma-yoga. The fruits of your efforts should not concern you in the least. As a *karma-yogī* you have to work for the purification of your mind, and there the matter ends. The fruits belong to the Lord alone, you need not bother about them.

Purity according to Patañjali

Patañjali in his *Yoga-Sūtras* has given a comprehensive scheme of purification. According to him ethical rules are of two types: *yama* (general rules) and *niyama* (specific rules). *Yama* consists of five disciplines which according to him are to be practised by all people everywhere at all times.[5] First comes *ahiṁsā* or not harbouring any ill-feelings towards others whether they are good or bad. Remove these ill-feelings as they arise in the mind. With a disturbed mind it is not possible to have any form of concentration. It is not possible for us to have a concentrated mind and at the same time cherish an evil thought against anybody. I am speaking of higher concentration.

The second most important point is *brahmacarya* or continence. Without *brahmacarya* there can be no real spiritual life. When you allow the water of life to flow out through the rat-holes of the body by wasting it through sex and sensual desires, there will be no energy left for higher forms of spiritual practice. It is no use rowing a boat while it is firmly anchored near the shore. What we want is communion with the Divine. If there is any obstruction in the form of sexual desire, communion with God is not possible. It is just like the case of a broken telegraph wire. The electricity may be there, the operator may be there, but the communication will never reach its destination as long as the broken wire is not repaired, or as long as the obstructing non-conductor is not removed.

Then comes *satya*, truth. One should practise truth in word, thought and deed. Sri Ramakrishna said that he could renounce everything but not truth. Hypocrisy and self-deception have no place in spiritual life.

Next comes *asteya*, non-stealing. This must never be taken in the gross sense only. Anything that we wish to possess at the cost of anybody else, anything that we get by unfair means, is stealing.

Fifth — *aparigraha*. Spiritual aspirants should not burden themselves with too many things. They must give up the tendency to hoard things. Give to others whatever you don't need yourself. If acceptance of gifts from others is unavoidable, then give them back something else. If you have no money to give, then give love, service, knowledge.

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[5] एते जाति-देश-काल-समयानवच्छिन्नाः सार्वभौमा महाव्रतम् ।

Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra*, 2.31

Niyama also consists of five rules. First comes *śouca*, purity, i.e. purity of both body and mind. The body is a temple of God and should therefore be kept clean. Second rule is *santoṣa*, contentment. One should be satisfied with one's physical environment. You may feel dissatisfied with your spiritual progress but do not blame the environment for all your troubles. Those who are always grumbling and complaining are simply wasting their time and energy. Do not create unnecessary discontent. Then comes *tapas,* sense control. One who abandons oneself to any form of sense enjoyment cannot have calmness of mind. 'Yoga is impossible for those who are devoid of self-control', says Vyāsa.[6] Then comes *svādhyāya.* This means not only the study of books, but also the study of one's own mind. Finally comes *Īśvarapraṇidhānam,* self-surrender to the Divine, which removes the subtlest form of impurity, viz. egotism. There is this important point to note: before the aspirant takes up the next step in spiritual discipline, viz. the practice of *āsana* (posture), he must have already gone through the whole of this ethical culture. So highly do the teachers of spiritual life value purity and non-attachment.

Pray for purity

Purity is necessary for really calming the mind. The mind can be calmed only by good and perfectly pure thoughts, only by thoughts which are not bound to the body or the world. The Upaniṣad says, 'We must meditate on Brahman with a calm mind.'[7] This calming of the mind is most important for all aspirants. In spiritual life it is a prelude to real meditation.

When we are struggling for purity of mind we should seek the assistance of God. We should pray to Him for total purification of our minds. We generally find it helpful to pray not only for our own spiritual welfare but also for that of others. Pray intensely for purity, concentration, calmness, singleness of purpose, and for your own spiritual welfare. And also pray for the spiritual welfare of all other beings, so that they too may become pure and calm and concentrated and dedicated to the higher life. Praying for others has a soothening effect on our nerves. It expands our minds. That is why Swami Vivekananda taught that immediately after sitting for meditation one should send thoughts of love to all creatures in all directions — south, east, north, west.[8] You will find this immensely helpful.

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[6] नातपस्विनो योगः सिध्यति।

Vyāsa's commentary on Patañjali's *Yoga-Sūtra,* 2.1

[7] ब्रह्म तज्जलानिति शान्त उपासीत।

Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 3.14.1. See also *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.2.24.

Every day we should make it a point to pray for the good of others. This sort of prayer, if done with a certain amount of concentration, will bring good to others. Not only that, it cultivates in us a feeling of love for our fellow beings who are struggling for the higher life and passing through great anguish and difficulties.

Expansion of the soul is very essential for true purity and calmness of mind and for concentrating it on the Divine. So when we pray for others we ourselves get nearer and nearer to God.

Don't brood over the past

One should stop all brooding over one's past, whatever it might have been like. What is done is for all times and can never be undone. So think of purity, think of what you are going to do in future, not of what you did in the past. He who thinks himself to be pure becomes pure. Try to efface the past as much as possible. Try to efface all old associations and impressions by replacing them with better and purer ones. Swami Vivekananda used to say, 'Would you try to wash dirt with dirt? Will sin cure sin, weakness cure weakness?'[9] You do not become pure by thinking of impurity; you will never get rid of sin by thinking you are a sinner. This is wrong psychology and will always produce just the opposite effect. If we dwell too much upon these thoughts of sin and impurity, we will lose sight of the fact that by our spiritual striving we can achieve something. Always try to follow the positive method. Instead of thinking, 'Oh, what a sinner I am; Oh, how impure I am', just think, 'Purity is my birthright and my true nature. I am free by nature. My very nature is purity and holiness.'

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[8] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1970), Vol. I, p. 145

[9] ibid., Vol. III, p. 237

The root-cause of all impurities must be removed — not just their external manifestations. When we do this we have to face a number of inner conflicts. But don't fear. Repression and the formation of complexes as such are not bad. They are necessary for a time as steps to complete sublimation which comes much later. Why raise such a hue and cry about complexes? Complexes are formed, whatever we do. Indulgence creates a complex in one form, abstinence creates a complex of another form. So we have to choose that course which will lead us to something higher and more positive, which will make us more and more free and help us in reaching the ultimate Goal of life. We are continually forming complexes on the relative plane, whatever we do. There are laws in the spiritual world; the physical laws are not the only laws to be observed. In these matters one must choose one's own path.

Every beginner should make it a point to avoid all dangerous stimuli in whatever form they may come to him. A tender plant has to be protected by a hedge. Spiritual life must be lived at all costs and that requires the development of tremendous will power and concentration. It is not for sluggards and weaklings. That is why Swami Vivekananda said: 'If you have faith in all the three hundred and thirty millions of your mythological gods . . . and still have no faith in yourselves, there is no salvation for you.'[10] The sense of sin can be very good in the case of some temperaments, but only if it serves as a goad to higher endeavour. It must goad us on to something spiritual. But a far better means to get rid of all these encrustations of impurity is to think of our eternal, innate purity which is our real nature. If habit is our 'second' nature, the pure Self is our 'first' nature. We are all our own ancestors, seen from the spiritual standpoint, and we only reap what we ourselves have sown. But reincarnation is not the most vital point. We have to try to get full illumination in this very life. So reincarnation should never be stressed very much in spiritual life. If our present life is the result of our own past, it follows that we can change our future by our present efforts. *Karma* is never identical with fate. The Law of Karma is the law of self-effort — intelligent, conscious self-effort; never a teaching of fatalism and lethargy. So we should rather stress intense *sādhanā* than be fatalistic in our attitudes.

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[10] ibid., Vol. III, p. 190

The pure heart becomes the reflector of Truth. So does the purified, thoughtful mind. The pure mind becomes progressively alive to the ideas of higher life. The purer the mind, the more awakened it becomes and the better does it reflect the Truth. In the highest realization, the mind and the heart, both merge in the ultimate Truth. So long as we cling to the false puppets and idols of love that we cherish in our hearts, it is not possible to have at the same time a sincere, deep yearning for God, whatever be our pretensions. It then becomes all empty make-believe. But for everybody there may come a time when these dolls lose all their charm; then alone comes a true and deep yearning for spiritual life; then all things worldly become 'saltless'.

Drastic steps necessary

In the spiritual realm Vedānta means 'allopathy' and not 'homoeopathy' at all. Since the disease of worldliness has become severe, strong medicines are necessary. Vedānta offers drastic cures to this disease. Strong injections and large doses of allopathic medicines are required. There is no such thing as 'homoeopathy' in Vedānta. Homoeopathic treatment won't do in the case of the Vedāntin, because Vedānta must never be diluted if it is to be at all effective. Don't you see what has become of Christ's teachings by endlessly diluting it?

Desires and the senses are our constant enemies, hence the absolute necessity of leading a disciplined and controlled life. There is no limit to the all-consuming power of desire, and so long as this is permitted to hold sway over us, we shall not be able to follow any of the spiritual teachings given us by the great ones. There should be no conscious or unconscious veiling of this fact.

It is not possible for us to take up each individual hankering and rid ourselves of it. No; a general pitiless massacre is necessary. When we turn to the Divine, allow Him to light the divine Light in us, all darkness will vanish at once. Then He Himself will appear on the battlefield and fight for us. The Lord does His work, but we must also do our part so long as we have our individuality, so long as we think we are the agents of our actions. We have to give up our clinging to this world of phenomena. We have to give up all bodily and worldly desires. We have to renounce all attachments, and all 'duties' pertaining to these attachments. That is the only way by which we can rid ourselves of the troubles and miseries of life and the darkness that is shrouding us from the Light. Let us allow Him to bring about our transformation, to give us the capacity to follow the higher life. Let us pay no more heed to the world than is absolutely necessary. We are always in the world, whether we live in a monastery or outside the monastery. We cannot run away from the world. But we must never allow the world to absorb our attention. As Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'The boat may stay in water but water should not stay in the boat.'[11]

Think about the Self

The best way of attaining real purity is to think that we are pure by nature, and never to think of sin, of impurity, of weakness, of imperfection. We are all perfect by nature, but we have forgotten our eternal perfection, and hence go on committing endless mistakes. But as soon as we regain the memory of our true essence, impurity, sin and imperfection become nothing more than so many dreams.

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[11] *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1975), p. 99

This purity wells up from within because it is our own and has been ours from time immemorial. It never comes from outside. It is not superadded, nor is it to be newly created. Spiritual life means this growth from within, though, really speaking, it is not a growth but only an uncovering; for, if perfection and purity did not belong to our own essence, we could never become pure and perfect, we could never be saved.

Bring about a transformation within, then this transformation automatically finds expression in the outside world. Our entire nature must be purified. See that you do not merely whitewash it. First of all, old accretions must be scraped off and the ground relaid in the proper way. Have intense spiritual practice. That will help you to rise above your false personality which is impure. Through your false personality (ego) your thoughts become impure and tainted. If your real personality were impure, you could never be purified, and there could be no hope of salvation for any of you. But our real personality is utterly pure, self-luminous, and we must regain it. Good thoughts, deeds and words are great aids; but they alone, without steady spiritual practice, are not enough, and they could never transform you into something which you are not at present.

There must be a completely new attitude towards ourselves, towards the world, towards all mental pictures and memories that rise in our mind.

We should feel sorry when an unclean thought wells up in our mind, but this should spur us forward all the more, and make us more dogged than ever. We should be thankful that we have come to know that such unclean things exist in our mind. If we do not know them we can never fight against them successfull. The greater the trouble, the more manly must the fight be, the greater our determination to remove them, and the greater our relentless tenacity.

If really there is dirt and filth in our mind, let us know this fact, and know how bad it is. To know an evil as it is, is half the battle won. It is always good for us to know the possibilities of our mind to do great mischief, so that we may be on our guard and become fully aware of its wily attempts at deception. What a terrible amount of misery man creates for himself and others by giving in to the impulses of lust, anger, greed, violence, etc.! And all these impulses would lie deeply hidden in our mind too, if we do not come to know them and annihilate them. Unless we turn our mind consciously to the higher life, it will always remain full of these.

For the aspirant the conscious shifting of the centre of consciousness is one of the most important steps in spiritual life. Ordinarily our personality works around some centre, the physiological, the mental or the spiritual centre. In some people the centre of consciousness is the stomach, e.g. gluttons and drunkards. In others it is the lower heart, the seat of worldly emotions. The spiritual aspirant should learn to shift his centre of consciousness from the lower to the higher. First of all he must find out his true spiritual centre and then through practice raise his consciousness constantly to this centre. He must always watch whether his consciousness has fallen down from the higher spiritual centre. Holding on to one's higher spiritual centre of consciousness is an important spiritual discipline.

Subtle desires

Sometimes, if we pry into the very depths of our mind, we may see some subtle desires lurking in the shadows of the mind in seed form; and if we are not very careful in our conduct, these will rise some day, sprout nicely and create a lot of trouble. Before the realization of God there may be tremendous control, but the desires and tendencies as such have not yet been annihilated. They are only kept under check. So, before realization we are never safe, and are sure to slip one day if we do not use the greatest discrimination in our whole conduct and in our associations and dealings with people. The devotee should never be too bold, even if he is a person of the greatest control. And even for such a person there should be a definite way of conduct, definite rules to be followed, so that he may never lapse into something evil through careless ways or bad associations.

The *Gītā* says: '*Rasa* (taste) doesn't leave us easily.'[12] And really speaking, even in the man of greatest control, some taste for the sense objects is left in seed form until it is all burnt in the fire of direct superconscious realization. After that there may be the semblance of desire but, like a burnt rope, it doesn't bind any longer. The contents of the consciousness of such a man have become wholly different, and he can no longer be affected.

Even if we know that the seed may sprout again, we should not become hopeless. This should only make us conscious of the immensity of our task. We should say to ourselves: 'So difficult is the task that I must have greater and greater determination, one-pointedness and alertness.' We should neither exaggerate nor minimize the danger. Be realistic and strong in dealing with yourself.

Sometimes we see in our dream, all of a sudden, an awful picture which had all along been lying in the hidden recesses of our mind. Sometimes, during meditation, hideous forms come up, rise in the mind and make us shudder. There is such a lot of dirt and filth in the very depths of our mind and all this will come up one day, rise to the surface and try to drag us down. We should never get unnerved by this, but should take it calmly and go on with our spiritual practice. Even the person who has the greatest control, but has not got the higher realization, should always be on his guard, because the trouble may arise any moment in its subtlest form through some unguarded association with others, through a word, through something seen. Be always guarded, always watchful. We are mostly affected first in a very subtle way, and then it goes on growing and growing, becoming larger and larger assuming enormous proportions, and finally we are swept away. This can happen any moment when we are not properly guarded and watchful.

The person who is really guarded, who is wide-awake, notices even the subtlest desires that arise in the slightest degree and kills them in their causal form without even allowing them to rise fully in the mental plane. We should all try to control the desires even in their causal state, and this we can never do if we do not become really watchful and discriminative. If we are really watchful, we will be able to detect the trouble in its causal form and kill it there itself. This is possible only if we are intensely devoted to God and think about Him constantly. When we do this, our mind becomes perfectly alert. Sri Ramakrishna's divine spouse, Sri Sarada Devi, who was the perfect embodiment of purity used to say: 'If a man constantly thinks about God, by which way can evil come to him?'

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[12] *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 2.59

Heavier responsibility for a spiritual man

If an undeveloped person does something wrong it is not so bad as a highly developed man's doing something wrong. If an uncultured person is rude it is not so bad as a cultured person's being rude. The more highly developed a man is, the greater is his responsibility. The more evolved a person is, the more is he expected to act in a better way than one who is not morally evolved. Their responsibilities are not the same.

As we grow, we must grow also in ethical culture. The ordinary man does not mind very much telling black lies. Most people would not mind telling a white lie. But there comes a time in the life of the aspirant when he becomes so very sensitive that he feels pain when he has to utter even a white lie in joke. Anyhow, never try to justify yourself if you have to make a compromise, but know the compromise to be a compromise and not the ideal, know your wrong to be wrong; do not try to justify it.

So long as a person's mind is gross, he only avoids the deed. When it grows subtler, he avoids the thought, and the thought is always the more important of the two. In moral and spiritual life, thought is to be stressed even more than action. But a gross mind does not see this. The person with an undeveloped mind thinks he is not affected even when he is actually affected. That is the fun. A bad thought is as bad as a bad act. In the case of the highest morals this is the condition that should be fulfilled: thought should be pure, word should be pure, deed should be pure. And without purity of thought there can be no purity of word, and much less, purity of deed.

In the highest form of ethical culture we find that nothing bad is done by the person or caused by him or even approved of by him. His is a threefold responsibility: he should not do anything bad, should not cause anything bad to be done, and should not approve of anything bad being done, or profit by it.[13]

Avoid temptations

During the period of our spiritual training we must try as much as possible to avoid any temptation, both in its gross and subtle forms. We should only salute from a safe distance anything that may become an object of temptation to us; let us not go near it. We must not rely too much on our own strength for a long time to come. We have such a dirty mind full of filthy impressions that once it is really stirred up it may create no end of trouble. Lust, hatred, greed, vulgarity — all these are lying hidden in us, waiting to make us their prey. And so we must be on our guard.

The trouble always arises through our being too little aware of the danger in the form of a tiny and apparently insignificant ripple in the mind. The outer stimulus, even if it be a very subtle and scarcely perceptible one, gradually affects the mind. Sometimes even the memory of some old impure impression is enough to upset us, because the germ or the seed is always inside, never outside. Unless the seed is inside, it can never sprout.

Attachment in any form may be enough to muddle the brain and bring about spiritual ruin in the mind of the aspirant, but when attachment and anger combine, the whole mind becomes chaotic, and all progress is stopped. All struggle for the higher life comes to an end when passion has its sway over a person. That is why we should carefully avoid any harmful stimulus even if it be a very subtle one, and keep our mind engaged with higher thoughts. We should not give any opportunity for lower propensities and impulses to rise. We should avoid as much as possible the company of persons of the other sex as well as that of our own sex who do not lead a strictly moral life, at least during the period of our spiritual training.

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[13] See Patañjali, *Yoga-Sutra*, 2.34.

We should not give an opportunity for passion to sway us. It is the nature of the mind to think, and if we do not give good and pure thoughts to the mind by avoiding all old impure associations, it is bound to think of bad and impure ones. So be up and doing. Always be on your guard and follow the path intelligently and assiduously.

'Fill the mind with Vedāntic thoughts until you fall asleep, until this body of yours drops off.'[14]

Ethical life must lead to spiritual life

According to Hinduism every man's psycho-physical personality and life are governed by three factors called *guṇas* which always exist in combination. Of these, *tamas* is the principle of inertia; *rajas,* the principle of mobility; and *sattva,* the principle of knowledge. A man's temperament depends upon the preponderance of one or other of these *guṇas*. The main problem in life is the adjustment of these *guṇas* in us. The *guṇas* are like ladders leading us to the terrace. The indolent person must go up and become active; the active person must become pure. When *sattva* predominates, one's mind becomes pure and clear. *Sattva* is the topmost rung of the ladder leading to Truth, but is not the Truth as such.

Our purity must lead us to God-realization. Attaining to the Divine means going beyond all the *guṇas*. In a parable of Sri Ramakrishna the *guṇ*as have been likened to three robbers.

> Once a rich man was passing through a forest, when three robbers surrounded him and robbed him of all his wealth. After snatching all his possessions from him, one of the robbers said: 'What's the good of keeping the man alive? Kill him.' Saying this, he was about to strike their victim with his sword when the second robber interrupted and said: 'There is no use killing him. Let us bind him fast and leave him here. Then he won't be able

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[14] See Chapter 1, footnote 17.

> to tell the police'. Accordingly the robbers tied him with a rope, left him, and went away.
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> After a while the third robber returned to the rich man and said: 'Ah! You're badly hurt, aren't you? Come, I'm going to release you.' The third robber set the man free and led him out of the forest. When they came near the highway, the robber said, 'Follow this road and you will reach home easily.' 'But you must come with me too', said the man, 'you have done so much for me. We shall all be happy to see you at our home.' 'No,' said the robber, 'it is not possible for me to go there. The police will arrest me.' So saying he left the rich man after pointing out his way.
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> Now, the first robber who said: 'What's the good of keeping the man alive? Kill him', is *tamas*. It destroys. The second robber is *rajas*, which binds a man to the world and entangles him in a variety of activities. *Rajas* makes him forget God. *Sattva* alone shows the way to God. It produces virtues like compassion, righteousness, and devotion. Again, *sattva* is like the last step of the stairs. Next to it is the roof. The Supreme Brahman is man's own abode. One cannot attain the Knowledge of Brahman unless one transcends the three *guṇas*.[15]

Our goal should be the Divine and divine realization, i.e. to realize Him within ourselves, and then to realize Him in all others. Our ideal is the person who is not bound by any *guṇas*, who has known God, and who remains always indifferent to all actions of the *guṇas*. By getting rid of the evil tendencies with the help of pure thoughts he has transcended even *sattva* and has reached the transcendental plane. His mind can at the most come down to the rung of *sattva*, but never can it again go below that.

Mere ethics does not make a man spiritual. Mere morals are no proof whatever of the spirituality of a person. This is the great mistake of what is generally called Protestantism — to make morality the be-all and end-all of life. Morals are necessary, and there can be no spirituality without one's previously having led a perfectly moral life, but morality itself can lay no claim to spirituality which far transcends the plane of morals.

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[15] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., p. 154

The Vedāntin says: It is not enough if you do selfless acts and lead a moral life, it is not enough if you scrupulously perform your duties, but something more is needed; you must attain the highest divine Knowledge and thereby realize the highest goal yourself.

Selfless acts and moral practices are only means and stepping-stones to the necessary purification of the mind and understanding without which the highest Knowledge cannot be attained by anybody. But the goal itself is the attainment of supreme Consciousness and Bliss. This Consciousness and Bliss are always within us, they are our real nature. Only, they are covered with the impurities of the mind. When the impurities are removed the true Self shines forth.

By impurities we mean not merely wrong passions and bad thoughts. Even the so-called good impulses and thoughts are obstacles to concentration and the attainment of the Self, and are hence regarded as impurities. Ethical life insists on the destruction or sublimation of bad thoughts and impressions. But spiritual life insists on the destruction or transcendence of even good thoughts and impulses. Emotions tie one to the mental and the physical planes. Spiritual life means transcending both these planes. That is why a spiritual aspirant is asked to outgrow the so-called conventional good conduct.

There can be no security at the emotional plane. One should keep one's emotions under control and sublimate them into intense spiritual aspiration. One should always remember that from the good emotion to the bad emotion, it is but a short way.

The true goal

Never weaken the mind through anything like self-pity or useless regret. If we can face our worst emotions and desires and still remain poised, we can make a new start, do something creative and proceed with energy. Brooding over the past is a disease which every spiritual seeker must cure within himself as soon as its symptoms appear. We must disentangle ourselves from untrue or impure thoughts and emotions before we can even begin to apply our minds to meditation.

Next, we may pray, and practise *japa* leading to meditation. This is not to indulge in parrot-like repetition of the Deity's name, but there must be constant awareness of the meaning of the holy words filling the mind. Prayer and *japa,* when methodically practised, create a new harmony which purifies our thinking, feeling and willing — a great step toward true meditation.

Listen to the words of our master, Swami Brahmananda:

> The easiest way to purify and steady the mind is to retire into solitude, control all cravings, and engage yourself in contemplation and meditation. The more you occupy the mind with holy thoughts, the greater will be your spiritual unfoldment. Just as a cow yields much milk when it is well fed, so when the mind is fed with spiritual food, it will yield greater tranquility. Spiritual food consists of meditation, prayer, contemplation and *japam.*
>
> Another way to steady the mind is to let it wander, but to keep a steady watch over its wanderings. After a while the mind itself becomes tired and comes back to find peace in God. If you watch your mind, your mind will in turn keep watch over you.[16]

But this sort of egocentric meditation alone is not sufficient. As we meditate on the supreme Spirit, we must also whole-heartedly surrender ourselves to God. Continuous practice of meditation reveals an inner Light, an intuitive power, by which the soul recognizes its contact with the Oversoul in which it remains absorbed. The divine ecstasy which results transforms the soul completely.

When the Godman comes down from the heights of divine realization, he brings with him a new vision and sees the supreme Spirit in himself and in all things. His mind is at peace, unshaken by misery or success. Free from fear, attachment, or anger, his heart remains filled with love and compassion for all beings. He has realized a new peace based on the unfailing foundation of divine Consciousness, and is not touched by anything in the world, but longs to share this peace and bliss with others.

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[16] *The Eternal Companion,* Swami Prabhavananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1971) pp. 251-252.

CHAPTER 12

THE PROBLEM OF SEX IN SPIRITUAL LIFE

The influence of sex on life

Sex is an important problem in spiritual life. Every aspirant must come to grips with it one day or other in his life. As some of the modern psychologists have pointed out, sex plays an important part in an average man's life, and absorbs a lot of his thinking, feeling and willing. Those who want to lead an intense spiritual life should first of all reduce this dominance of sex in their lives. Those who have led a pure life from an early age will find the problem easier. But the modern young man turns to spiritual life after collecting lots of impure thoughts. He generally finds a huge jungle to clear before he can successfully take up spiritual life.

The chief difficulty about sex is that it exists at various levels of personality. Sex is not all physical. Apart from the physiological urges, sex exists in the mental planes as subtle attractions or fascinations. It is like an iceberg just the tip of which is seen outside. The more introspective an aspirant becomes, the more he understands the subtle ramifications of sex within him. Very often this frightens people. Few people can face the great challenge that the control of sex offers. But unless one fully meets it, there can be no true spiritual life. One needs tremendous grit, an iron will for this. If an ordinary man gets a peep into the mind of a true spiritual aspirant, he will be frightened away. It is like the interior of a blast furnace where pure metal is being constantly separated from the ore.

Celibacy and marriage

The first thing that a spiritual aspirant must decide is whether to remain a celibate or to marry. Hinduism does not look upon married life as bad but it definitely imposes certain restrictions on it. But on the celibate its rules are pretty hard.

Those who want to lead an exclusively spiritual life will find life-long celibacy an absolute necessity. Christ said:

> There are some eunuchs, which were born so from their mother's womb; there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men; and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.[1]

This was the passage Sri Ramakrishna told two boys, Sharat, and Shashi, (who were later known as Swami Saradananda and Swami Ramakrishnananda) to read when they first went to see him. He remarked that marriage was the root of all bondage. All great prophets have been unanimous about this fact, but worldly people are always so anxious to do something for God's creation, as if God needed their help. All this is hypocrisy and cant. God does not need anybody to help Him in His creation; neither do these people really care. What they want is their enjoyment, not God's creation. In one of his famous letters, St. Paul wrote:

> I say therefore to the unmarried and widows. It is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn.[2]

This is a very salutary advice. We do not say that everyone must become a monk. That depends on the stage of evolution one has reached. It is better to become a householder than to become a monk who breaks his great vows. Outward renunciation must always be followed by inner renunciation, otherwise it has no value. The monk must have both; only outward renunciation won't do. For those who cannot renounce inwardly because of their weaknesses and who keep themselves busy with worldly ideas, hopes and thoughts, it is better to follow the householder's life and not be hypocrites. A man who really renounces inwardly, can also live in the world and yet fulfil the conditions of absolute *brahmacarya,* all ethical conditions, and lead a sexually pure life, a life of non-violence, non-hatred and non-attachment, without fettering himself to any other human being through personal relationship. But this is very difficult and quite impossible for many people without preliminary spiritual training and long years of spiritual practice. Let them at least know that such a life is possible though it is rare and for most people, quite difficult.

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[1] *Bible,* St. Matthew. 19:12

[2] *Bible,* 1 Corinthians. 7:8,9

Those who want to become monks or remain celibates throughout life must be extra-careful. Do you know the story of the monk who was ruined by a rat? There was a monk who was continually disturbed in his meditation by a rat. So some kind people gave him a cat to catch the rat. Naturally, the poor monk had to feed the cat with milk, and as it was rather difficult for him to get milk always, he decided to get a cow. The cow had to be fed, so people suggested to him: 'Why not buy a field?' Finding this advice very reasonable, he bought a field. But after a short time, he found that the field had to be tilled. And this meant quite a lot of work which he could not do alone. So he married, and that was the end of his monkhood. This presents allegorically what generally happens in human life. One desire just breeds another, till in the end they become innumerable and can no longer be controlled.

Duty of householders

In all higher spiritual paths great stress is laid on the practice of continence. In the Hindu religious system the student is asked to observe strict continence and never to depart from it consciously. When he enters the householder's life, he does not throw all self-control to the winds. He holds the ideal of a remarkably-controlled life before him. Śrī Kṛṣṇa in his last message in the *Bhāgavatam* says:

> The practice of continence except for the purpose of procreation, the performance of the regular obligations of life with purity and contentment, and kindness to animals are among the duties of a householder.[3]

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[3] ब्रह्मचर्य तपः शौचं संतोषो भूतसौहृदम् ।
गृहस्थस्याप्यृतौ गन्तुः सर्वेषां मदुपासनम् ॥
Bhāgavatam, 11.18.43

The ideal householder is a great hero as he has to live the spiritual ideal in a world full of temptations.

While an exception is made in the case of those who live a family life, raising children and serving the society thereby, all other spiritual seekers should strive to transmute the energy that expresses itself as sex energy and sexual thought into spiritual power. This greatly helps in the awakening of the latent spiritual consciousness and its flow to the higher centres of consciousness, and brings new light and blessings to the aspirant. An exception is made in the case of householders, for it is not practical to live a life of perfect continence in married life. At the same time, the householder is enjoined to learn complete self-control gradually.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that after the birth of one or two children husband and wife should live like brother and sister.[4] But in order to attain this kind of self-control, both husband and wife should struggle for it right from the beginning. Immorality means not only impurity acquired by extra-marital relations; one can be as immoral with one's wife as with any outsider. If one leads a sexually immoderate life with one's own wife wherefrom is he to get the energy and intensity so absolutely necessary for all real spiritual striving? We should clearly and dispassionately recognize this fact. We need tremendous energy for leading the higher life; and this energy of ours, which is really one, cannot be wasted through sexual channels, if we want to progress and really attain perfection. Spiritual life is something more than mere social ethics and what people call normal good life. It requires great self-control and purity. Whoever desires to lead the higher life must pay the price fully. There can be no bargaining in this. Married people should also exercise great self-control if they are serious about spiritual life.

In the 'New Testament' Jesus Christ makes a significant statement about the soul's life after death: 'For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven.'[5] We seldom think about our life after death. Do people marry and beget children in the after-life? What happens to the soul after death? The future is as real as the present but few people bother about it. Enchanted by the attractions of our present life we seldom think about our future life.

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[4] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda, (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 640

Another duty of householders is to encourage and help those youngsters — men and women — who sincerely want to lead a celibate life, the life of a monk or a nun. The Holy Mother used to say that an unmarried man is half-free.[6] Very often parents are over-anxious to drag all their children into married life even against the latter's wish. You know what happened to Swami Yogananda, one of the illustrious disciples of Sri Ramakrishna? As a young man he did not like to get married at all. But, unable to withstand the importunities and tears of his mother, he finally got married. However, even after marriage he continued to lead a chaste life devoting all his time to spiritual practice. Seeing that his mother asked him, 'If you don't want to live like a householder why did you marry?' The innocent young man replied that it was for her sake that he had done it. His mother then told him, 'My son, does anybody marry because somebody else tells him to do so? Everybody marries because of his own wish.' Yogin was shocked to hear this. That is what happens in many homes. Parents drag their children into marriage even against their wish and then leave them to their own fate. Very often parents continue to interfere in their children's lives even after their marriage and that leads to domestic quarrels. It is of course true that not all young men and women wish to remain unmarried. It is also true that many of them talk about celibacy and monasticism without knowing anything about their own mind. But there is always a small section of sincere young men and women who are pure-hearted and sincerely wish to dedicate their heart and soul to the Lord alone. Why not allow some of them to pursue a life of perfect chastity in a monastery or a similar place? Why not allow some of them to enjoy the fragrance of holiness and purity?

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[5] *Bible,* St. Matthew, 22:30

[6] *At Holy Mother's Feet* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1963), p. 367

Here what the Holy Mother once told her niece is worth citing. One day a young man named Manasa came to the Holy Mother with a desire to receive initiation and ochre robe from her. The Holy Mother gladly granted his request. That made him very happy. In the evening he was seated in the house of uncle Kali, singing songs in glorification of the Divine Mother. The Holy Mother liked those songs very much. Her nieces Radhu, Maku and Nalini, one or two of her sisters-in-law and some other devotees were with her. One of her sisters-in-law said, 'She has made this young man a *sādhu.*' Maku then commented, 'That's true. See what our aunt has done. She makes these good young men embrace monastic life. Their parents have brought them up with great suffering to themselves. All their expectations are centred in their children. What hopes they would have entertained about them! All these are now shattered. And what will this young man do now? Either he will go to Rishikesh and beg for his food, or he will clean the dirt and filth of the sick in the hospital. Why? To marry and settle down in life is also a form of religion. Well, aunt, if you thus make these young men *sādhus*, *Mahāmāyā* will be angry with you. If they want to be *sādhus*, let them be so of their own accord. Why should you be instrumental in their embracing monastic life?' The Holy Mother said to her in reply, 'Look here, Maku, these are all divine children. They will live in the world immaculate like unsmelt flowers. What can be nicer than that? You have seen for yourself what kind of happiness worldly life can give. What have you learned from me all these days! Why so much attraction for worldly life? Why so much animal propensity? What sort of happiness do you derive from it? Can you not conceive even in dream the ideal of a pure life? Can't you live with your husband even now as brother and sister? Why this desire to lead a piggish life? This misery of the world has been gnawing into my bones.'[7]

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[7] See Swami Tapasyananda, *Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1969), pp. 417-18

People who are fully able to control the sex impulse for many years and are able to observe strict continence in thought, word and deed, gain incredible creative strength on a higher plane. They alone really enjoy life, even physically, because they alone are the masters of their body and mind, and can direct them as they like. A good horseman has great pleasure in riding his horse and in making it follow his directions. Worldly people do not know the amount of joy a perfectly chaste person gets even out of his body, not to speak of his mind.

Warnings to the unmarried

Sri Ramakrishna always used to warn all his disciples — mostly young men — against the snares of *kāminī-kāñcana* ('woman and gold'). But he used to tell the women who came to him for instruction, 'Beware of the snares of a man, even if he is a very near relative.' One cannot attain anything in spiritual life without perfect chastity in thought, word and deed. The extent of real chastity attained determines the whole progress of the aspirant. Everyone should be on his guard with every person of the other sex. Real chastity means infinitely more than the mere avoidance of sexual intercourse.

All unmarried persons, no matter who they are, should avoid the company of persons of the other sex (men and women), and should always consciously think thoughts which are opposed to the idea of sex. Especially in the beginning of spiritual life, the sex instinct grows in strength in many people. When we water and manure the soil nicely, the weeds too will grow nicely along with the plants we originally wished to grow. We have to uproot these weeds when they rear their heads. Otherwise they will smother the good plants. This means we must be extremely careful regarding the company we allow ourselves to be in for the first few years of our striving. Never believe yourself to be so strong as to be above listening to such advice. Avoid spending time in the company of persons of the other sex, no matter how pure they may be. Before you have attained real sublimation culminating in the transformation of your whole being, concentration influences your sexual imagination also and makes even the apparently harmless pictures more vivid and living, and apparently harmless emotions, very strong passions. The arousal of sex need not be in any gross way at all. Subtle attractions, subtle forms of stimulation, are worse than gross forms, because for the beginner, the former are not as easily recognizable as the latter. Many a time I have found great carelessness in aspirants with regard to these points, and many have come to grief because of that.

There is a funny story which very aptly illustrates the effects of carelessness regarding our choice of company. Once a camel just pushed its nose through the door of an Arab's tent. The Arab first objected to this, but the camel said, 'Oh, I am only just putting my nose into your room for a moment. Nothing more.' But in fact, it slowly pushed in its ugly head and then its whole body through the door, and when the owner objected to its presence in his room it said, 'If you do not like my presence in your house you had better get out, but I will not!' Lust sometimes comes in some such way, in the form of 'duty', in the form of 'compassion', in the form of 'service'. Our mind is always out to deceive us about its true motive. Without chastity in thought, word and deed, nothing can be achieved in spiritual life. The subconscious or unconscious mind always wants to do harm to us, and it patiently waits for an opportunity to do so effectively. So you should give it a good scolding now and then. Drive into it powerful suggestions and keep it under control. After all, it is you who are the master, not the mind. Do not allow the camel to come in. If you do, you will have great difficulty driving it out again.

Beyond the male-female principle

If the thought of any woman rises in your mind, associate it at once with the form of the Holy Mother or with that of your own mother. Kill the sexual thought at once. Do not permit yourself to be in the company of women mentally. In the Tantras there is an instruction which says that all woman forms should be associated with Umā and all man forms with Śiva. This attitude is of great value in spiritual life. There is a famous Sanskrit verse supposed to be written by Śaṁkarācārya:

> Pārvatī is my mother, Śiva is my father, Śiva's devotees are my friends and all the three-worlds are my native land.[8]

The aspirant who looks upon God as his father and mother is safe anywhere in the world. But the beginner cannot do it effectively. So he should be careful about moving in the company of persons of the other sex and talking to them.

There is another effective means of counteracting the influence of sexual thoughts. Just think of some women and men who never know what sex life is. That kind of visualization does a lot of good. If you do not know any such pure people, think of Sri Ramakrishna or the Holy Mother who were from their very birth personifications of sexual purity in all its aspects. Dwell on that thought daily, making it a part of your spiritual practice. Your own self or ego slowly absorbs the noble attributes of such a pure personality and undergoes a complete change in due course.

Our object in life should be to transcend the male principle as well as the female principle and to reach a plane where there is absolutely no sex. On the lower planes of life we see the male and the female, but on the higher planes all sex ideas vanish. In another verse Śaṁkarācārya says:

> O Śiva, Thou art my Ātman. The Divine Mother is my mind. My Prāṇas are Thy attendants and my body is Thy abode. All these sense contacts are part of Thy worship. My sleep is like remaining in *samādhi* in Thee. Wherever I go, I am just going round Thee. All the words that I speak are hymns to Thee. And all forms of activities I engage myself in, O Lord, are Thy worship.[9]

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[8] माता मे पार्वती देवी पिता देवोमहेश्वरः ।
बान्धवाः शिवभक्ताश्च स्वदेशो भुवनत्रयम् ॥

Śaṁkarācārya, *Hymn to Annapūrṇā*, verse 12

[9] आत्मा त्वं गिरिजा मतिः सहचराः प्राणाः शरीरं गृहं
पूजा ते विषयोपभोगरचना निद्रा समाधिस्थितिः ।
संचारः पदयोः प्रदक्षिणविधिः स्तोत्राणि सर्वा गिरो
यद्यत्कर्म करोमि तत्तदखिलं शंभो तवाराधनम् ॥

Śaṁkarācārya, *Śivamānasapūjā*, verse 4

Only a hero can stand the truth

In the life of an aspirant sex consciousness plays such an important role that it should never be awakened, even when he sees a picture. First of all, reduce your body consciousness, your sex consciousness, by never thinking, 'I am a man, a woman' etc. And to the extent to which you succeed in not thinking 'I am a man, a woman' etc., you come to have a new outlook and new reactions. This change at first brings about an awful unsettlement in some people who have the consciousness that they are men or women, their consciousness being centred on their body. Such people cannot even be told this truth. We must dilute it so much that very little of it remains, and what remains must be taken as the working ideal. Only sincere spiritual aspirants must be told the full truth regarding these matters. Swamiji in his 'Song of the Sannyāsin' forcefully says:

> Truth never comes where lust and fame and greed
> Of gain reside. No man who thinks of woman
> As his wife can ever perfect be;
> Nor he who owns the least of things, nor he
> Whom anger chains, can ever pass thro' Māyā's gates.
> So, give these up, *sannyāsin* bold!
> Say — 'Om Tat Sat, Om!'[10]

These truths are too much for most people. They cannot stand them, and become unsettled. So weaker doses must be given, weaker injections of truth, for a time. But one day everyone will have to face them and follow their call, no matter even if these break their hearts. Only a hero can stand the truth. There is no place for weaklings in real spiritual life. True religion, real Vedānta is no joke.

Beware of your mind's deceptions

All temptations are mental. Usually it is not what you do but what you think that is more troublesome. So take care of your imaginations. Beware of how other people's vibrations affect your mind. Develop more and more high sensibility. It is not enough to say, 'I have not done anything impure.' Analyze what you feel and what you think in the company of others — whether they attract you or not. The moment there is any attraction or aversion, be on your guard. Salute all people who tempt you, from a safe distance. No attraction is harmless in a finer sense. Never deceive yourself on this point. You should not allow old impure associations to crop up in your mind by mixing with people who may awaken them. When you follow this advice and practise rising strong opposite currents of thought, you will gradually be able to efface all impure impressions which you have allowed to sink into your mind by your carelessness. Then alone will your spiritual life be made safe to a certain extent. By repeatedly rising opposite thought currents temptations become weaker, and finally the new spiritual thoughts completely replace old associations and memories — but only if you strictly follow the advice. You cannot create a vacuum in your mind all of a sudden. It is even dangerous for the beginner to attempt it. So in the beginning he must learn to cultivate good thoughts. The question of transcending the thought plane comes only much later.

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[10] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, 1978), Vol. IV, p. 394

Control of mind comes step by step through practice but you can never hope to attain it if you are careless in your ways. If you allow the attraction of any other person to gain influence over you, you will never be able to attain control of mind whatever you may do. Then you are bound to have a nasty fall after some time. If you allow any woman to meet you as a man, if you allow any woman to attract you, control of mind is out of the question. You should always behave in such a way that every woman will feel that she cannot meet you on the plane of sex, that you do not see the woman in her and are not interested in the woman. But for the beginner the only way is to avoid the company of other sex as much as possible and never to talk intimately with any person belonging to the other sex. If others want to stand in our way, we must just brush them aside, even if their hearts break. There must be a parting of ways however intimate we might have been before. A love that is dangerous has to be avoided at all costs. Do not grow sentimental about this. Otherwise, you will have to pay the price for your folly and egotism.

Unmarried young men and women should be very careful about their friendships. They are usually too young and emotional to recognize their own true motives. Very often sex hides under the cloak of duty. When the thought, 'It is my duty to be kind to him or her' rises in you, you should analyze it. Invariably, you find it is nothing but sex coming in some nice garb and finding some nice excuses for your clinging to a certain person. At first you see only the camel's nose. Never allow yourself to be caught in the snares of your mind. You may hear: 'Oh, my heart will break if you leave me.' In certain cases you may have to allow that heart to break. Such an attitude is necessary if the other person does not want to turn to spiritual life and wants to prevent you from doing so. You should be sympathetic and pray for such people, but there must be a parting of your ways. Otherwise both of you will get drowned in worldly life. You must have great strength of mind. You succeed only after a long time, but the struggle must be carried on unceasingly and doggedly. Medicine is so unpleasant to taste, but it has to be taken if the patient wishes to be cured.

Advice to the unmarried (continued)

All these sexually aggressive people you daily meet make it terribly difficult for you to intensify your spiritual life. Avoid all danger zones and all such 'free' people who are proud of their so-called freedom which is nothing but abject slavery. If you cannot find clean people of your own sex, avoid all company and stay alone in the company of the Lord. This is the only way to salvation for the unmarried man or woman. Avoid all talk about the other sex or sex topics. Avoid seeing any sexually attractive picture. Do not read any novels or any other book on such topics. Do not see any plays that have to do with sex. Avoid the outward sex stimulus so long as the tug-of-war is going on inside you. Any reading or occupation that brings in any form of sex stimulus must be carefully avoided during the period of *sādhanā*. If we do not do this, we shall never attain the necessary purification for higher forms of practice, and we are bound to come to grief sooner or later. Then there will be no freedom or fearlessness for us. Then we shall never rise to the full stature of a human being but shall always remain animals with more or less developed minds.

Unmarried men and women who wish to maintain life-long *brahmacarya,* would do well to note the following anecdote in the life of a Christian monk. It is very instructive. One day one of his brothers had been accused of having shaken hands with a woman, and he was brought before the chapter. He pleaded that she was a person of good reputation and great purity and devotion. But the great monk who was presiding over the chapter told him bluntly: 'Rain is no doubt good, and earth is also good, yet when mingled they form mud which is not good. Similarly, though the hands of men and women are both good, yet great evil may arise in thought and affection if they are carelessly brought together.' This story can teach the celibate a great lesson. Always learn to go to the very root of the matter and never stop at the first superficial impression an action or a thought gives you. There is no East or West in this matter. Whether you are an easterner or a westerner, you have to be careful in mingling with people of the opposite sex. Even married people must be careful about this point. Hindu scriptures have laid down the rule that the householder must look upon all women other than his own wife as his mother. A well-known saying of Tulsīdās goes like this:

> Truthfulness, obedience to God, and the regarding of others' wives as one's mother, are the greatest virtues. If one does not realize God by practising them, then Tulsī is a liar.[11]

Never be afraid of truth, even if truth means death. If truth breaks your heart, well and good; if truth breaks other people's hearts, well and good. Truth is more powerful and beneficial than false appearances. Allow your heart to be broken for the sake of truth. In the beginning truth destroys everything we used to hold dear. A new foundation is needed for spiritual life and on this new foundation the superstructure is to be built slowly and carefully. The laying of a new foundation naturally means destruction of the old one. But in the end this brings peace, happiness and freedom to ourselves and to others. The poison tree planted by our thoughtless actions and desires must be cut down ruthlessly. Having reared the poisonous tree we find it very hard to cut it down but it must be done.

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[11] See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* op. cit., p. 726.

The life and message of Sri Ramakrishna

Sri Ramakrishna's message is: Be spiritual and realize the Truth yourself. By living the spiritual life we can make the Divine a living experience in our own life. In the human being the passions, usually lust and greed, or *kāminī-kāñcana* as he called them, play the greatest part, and Sri Ramakrishna shows us how we may overcome sex and greed — the greatest obstacles on the path of spiritual progress. He wishes us to have a new outlook on ourselves and others, men and women. Man as well as woman must have a spiritual outlook. They should look upon themselves and others as manifestations of the Divine. They should consider themselves as souls inhabiting bodies.

They should never think in terms of the body, but should rise to the level of the spirit. This is a most vital point to note for the spiritual aspirant. And the modern age needs this message more than anything else. The instruction the Master gives us was first of all realized in his own life and in the life of the Holy Mother. Without purity there can be no spiritual life. Seeing the Divine in oneself and in all other men and women, is the only ultimate solution for the modern world-wide problem of sex and the troubles connected with it. Seeing the Divine in all is the only practical solution, and the present age needs this more than any other age ever did. 'Lust and gold' is the sign of this age, because this is pre-eminently the age of sex and worship of Mammon. That is why the Master had to go to the very extremes of the denial of sex and greed so as to teach people the need for controlling these lower instincts of man. The more one sees the western life, the more one comes to understand the full significance of Sri Ramakrishna's life for all humanity.

Solution at the spiritual plane

You can never rise above the sex idea by merely hating woman or man or by fleeing from the world as many of the early Christian ascetics tried to do. Something more is needed. Even hatred is a kind of negative attraction. The only way to transcend sex is to see the Divine in all men and women. There is a well-known Upaniṣadic passage:

> Thou art the woman and the man, the boy and the girl, and the old man tottering on his stick. Thou alone has assumed all these various forms.[12]

But in order to cultivate this attitude one should begin with oneself. It is not the woman who is outside that is dangerous but the man within. Give up the idea that you are a man, then the woman vanishes too. Think you are the Self — the pure light of Consciousness that is shining in all bodies. Drive down into the depths of your mind this concept of the eternally pure Ātman. Early in the morning think about the Ātman; in the night before going to bed think deeply about the Ātman; always fill your mind with it. A spiritual aspirant should think about the concept of Ātman constantly at least for the sake of purity of mind.

As I have often said, our concept of reality depends upon our concept of ourselves. If you look upon yourself as a man, you cannot help looking upon a woman as a woman. But if you look upon yourself as a star of light, then everyone else will just become another star in this wonderful firmament of God. This idea of looking upon oneself as the Ātman is one of the important doctrines of the Hindu faith. But few people make full use of it. Even long before you actually attain illumination, the very concept in itself is of great help. If you fill your mind with this idea, then your whole personality will be coloured by it and your attitude and behaviour will change. Such a change is a fundmental need in spiritual life.

There must be a definite change in our consciousness. We should deliberately shift our centre of consciousness from lower centres to the higher ones. The psychic power called *kuṇḍalinī* lies coiled at the lower centres. As long as the sex centre is active, the *kuṇḍalinī* lies dormant. In order to awaken it, the activity of the sex centre must be stopped. If by some means or other (e.g. *prāṇāyāma*) the *kuṇḍalinī* is roused before that centre has been closed, the activity of the latter may get, suddenly increased, often pulling down the aspirant towards a disaster. So, before the *kuṇḍalinī* is awakened, the sex centre must be sealed. Not only that. The higher centres must be opened with the help of studies, prayer, meditation, etc. The *kuṇḍalinī*, when awakened, must be made to flow upwards to higher centres.

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[12] त्वं स्त्री त्वं पुमानसि त्वं कुमार उत वा कुमारी ।
त्वं जीर्णो दण्डेन वञ्चसि त्वं जातो भवसि विश्वतोमुखः ॥

Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 4.3

The higher centres must be stimulated. The unconscious mind must be slowly changed; it is like a fertile field: whatever idea you plant there will immediately strike roots and grow. If you plant good thoughts there, they will grow and gradually you will find your inner resistance to spiritual life becoming less and less. The very mind that was once against you now becomes beneficial to you. There is a famous song of Rāmprasād, the great poet-saint of Bengal:

> O mind, you do not know how to farm!
> Fallow lies the field of your life.
> If you had only worked it well,
> How rich a harvest you might reap![13]

The problem of sex can be successfully tackled only on the plane of the Spirit. The soul is sexless. The light of the Ātman has nothing to do with sex. Unless one realizes this inner Light, one can never completely overcome the sex idea. The peace and joy and freedom that we feel when we attain it are more than a reward for all our struggles and pain and suffering.

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[13] See The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* op. cit., p. 189.

CHAPTER 13

PRACTICE OF BRAHMACARYA OR CONTINENCE

(Specific instructions for the celibate)

Necessity of Brahmacarya

Swami Vivekananda laid great emphasis on continence. He used to tell his disciples: '*Brahmacarya* should be like a fire tingling in your veins.' In his 'Rāja-yoga' he says that through continence sex energy is converted into a higher form of psychic energy called *ojas*:

> The *yogīs* say that that part of the human energy which is expressed as sex energy, in sexual thought, when checked and controlled, easily becomes changed into *ojas*, and as the *mūlādhāra* guides these, the *yogī* pays particular attention to that centre. He tries to take up all his sexual energy and convert it into *ojas*. It is only the chaste man or woman who can make the *ojas* rise and store it in the brain; that is why chastity has always been considered the highest virtue. A man feels that if he is unchaste, spirituality goes away, he loses mental vigour and moral stamina. That is why in all the religious orders in the world which have produced spiritual giants you will always find absolute chastity insisted upon. That is why the monks came into existence, giving up marriage. There must be perfect chastity in thought, word and deed; without it the practice of Rāja-yoga is dangerous, and may lead to insanity. If people practise Rāja-yoga and at the same time lead an impure life, how can they expect to become *yogīs*?[1]

In the spiritual teachings of Swami Brahmananda we read:

> To secure the full development and vitality of the body, brain and mind, *brahmacarya* is essential. Those who observe strict *brahmacarya* develop a strong memory and a remarkable capacity for understanding. By means of *brahmacarya* a special

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[1] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), Vol. I, p. 170

> nerve is developed which brings about these wonderful powers. Do you know why our great teachers have laid so much emphasis on *brahmacarya*? It is because they knew if a man fails in this respect everything is lost. The strict *brahmacārin* does not lose his vitality. He may not look like a *pahalvān* (a great athlete) but the development of his brain is so fine that his capacity for grasping supersensuous things is remarkable.[2]

Once Swami Brahmananda told me, 'My boy, give your body and mind to worldly enjoyments, and the world will destroy them both. Devote them to God and His service, and you will enjoy bodily health, peace of mind and spiritual joy.'[3]

Give all that you have — your health, wealth, youth, talents, everything to the Divine. If you give it to the world, the world will spoil it and leave you empty in the end. The forces of *avidyā* and destruction are everywhere. Forgetting this if we rush thoughtlessly into worldly life, we will have to suffer the consequences.

One of the difficulties about the observance of continence is that we see people getting along and thriving without that. This may be true in worldly life. *Brahmacarya* may not make you an intellectual prodigy or a wrestler, though it definitely improves the mind and the body. But the main purpose of *brahmacarya* is the development of the spiritual faculty — the spiritual 'nerve' called *medhā nāḍi* — referred to by Swami Brahmananda. When a man practises *brahmacarya* for ten or twelve years he feels the awakening of this 'nerve' or faculty in him. It is the power of intuition latent in all men. Sri Ramakrishna[4] and Swami Vivekananda have spoken about this. It is not a mere theory.

Moreover, *brahmacarya* is essential for the nourishment and vigour of the brain. People who do not observe *brahmacarya* find their brain getting heated up quickly when they try to meditate. Sustained contemplation is impossible unless the brain is strong and cool. Without continence the brain will not be able to withstand the tremendous strain of long hours of meditation.

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[2] Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion*, (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1978), p. 238

[3] ibid., 1971 edn., p. 84

[4] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), pp. 362-63

Really speaking, *brahmacarya* is absolutely necessary in higher spiritual life, although people are not told about this very plainly to avoid discouraging them at the very beginning of their spiritual life. The real truth is that there can never be any real meditation, any higher realization, without unbroken *brahmacarya* in thought, word and deed. Without perfect continence and purity, higher spiritual life does not become natural. But we usually talk about it in a milder and less direct way so as not to upset people.

The first task in spiritual life is to open the higher centres of consciousness. Meditation has to be practised in one of the higher centres, and for this it has to be opened first. How can this be done if the lower centres are intensely active? The sum total of psychic energy left free for higher activity is not much. If all this is diverted to lower centres, the higher centres will not develop.

If the working of the lower centres is not stopped, the spiritual aspirant will never be able to keep himself on a higher plane, whatever people may say or think. Really speaking, there can be no spiritual life if these lower centres are allowed to function. Stop their work. Unless you do this, the higher centres can never work properly. When the water-taps in the ground floor of a building are all open, you find little or no water available on the upper floors.

Some people may have got some glimpses of mystic vision even without observing the strictest *brahmacarya*, but they can never succeed in remaining on the higher plane and no higher form of realization can ever be attained by them. *Brahmacarya* is to be observed under all circumstances if the aspirant wants to attain to any higher life and to any higher form of realization. There is no other way out. This is the plain truth about spiritual life.

Wrong notions about continence in the West

The trouble in the West is that there the spiritual ideal has been lowered very much and dragged down to the plane of mere morals. Nobody bothers about direct superconscious realization. People are so beggarly that they are satisfied with very little. Just a little good mood is enough for them. And then they go and make much of it. Moral life is not spiritual life, although a really spiritual person will always act morally as it has become habitual and natural to him. Conventional morality alone is not enough for higher spiritual experience. A thorough overhauling of personality is needed. This is the gist of Christ's 'Sermon on the Mount': 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.'[5] The religion that Christ taught was essentially a religion for the monk. Something of the self-denial and discipline of the monastic way of life is essential for every spiritual aspirant, even if he is a householder, if he wants to gain some genuine spiritual experience. Protestantism, by discarding celibacy and monasticism, has done a great harm to the spiritual tradition in the West.

Modern psychologists have done a great service to humanity by their researches into the nature of the unconscious, dreams, motivation, complexes, repression, etc. But very many of them have in effect done an equal amount of harm by propagating the theory of free expression. Though many eminent psychoanalysts have protested against this abuse of a noble science, the idea that suppression of sex is harmful has rapidly gained popularity in the West. The Yoga psychology, on the contrary, believes that conscious suppression of sex with a spiritual aim is not only not harmful but also absolutely essential. Repression may be dangerous, but not Yogic suppression followed by sublimation of the sex instinct through love of God and meditation. At first this may lead to tension and conflicts. But then, is there any higher venture which does not cause some tension or struggle? The true and earnest spiritual aspirant soon overcomes all internal troubles, and through divine Grace reaches a higher plane where he is free from the conflicts of the lower planes.

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[5] *Bible*, St. Matthew, 5:48

Nowadays there is an attempt in the West to popularize Vedānta without stressing purity of mind. Many people in the West feel drawn to Advaita because of its loftiness and logical beauty. But intellectual appreciation alone is not enough. Many people think that Advaita does not need the practice of *brahmacarya* and other virtues. This is not true. On the contrary, it demands the strictest control of mind and senses. A *jīvanmukta* or a liberated man may not pay much attention to social conventions but never does he — nor can he — violate the fundamental virtues like chastity. These have become his second nature. In the *Vedāntasāra* we find a passage that says, 'if a man who has known the truth of Oneness acts according to his whims, then where is the difference between a knower of Truth and a dog as regards eating impure stuff?'[6]

Testimony of great saints

In the higher forms of Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism, great stress has been laid on the observance of perfect *brahmacarya* in thought, word and deed. You find it in the 'Sermon on the Mount', in the *Vinaya Piṭaka* of Buddhism, in the Upaniṣads, in the *Gītā* and in the *Bhāgavatam*. A socially accepted form of moral life alone is not enough for a spiritual aspirant. He must attain perfection in moral virtues, especially chastity. He must totally control his sex instinct.

The great mystics of the world always gave the highest importance to chastity. The words of Brother Giles, who was originally an illiterate peasant but who later on became one of the foremost disciples of St. Francis of Assisi, are to be remembered by every sincere spiritual aspirant:

> Amongst all other virtues I would set the virtue of chastity first, because sweet chastity contains all perfection in itself; but there is no other virtue which can ever be perfect without chastity.
>
> Chastity is, in strict truth, the careful and continual custody of our corporeal and spiritual senses, in order to preserve them pure and immaculate for God alone.

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[6] Sadānanda Yogīndra's *Vedāntasāra*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974), p. 121. Quoted from Sureśvara's *Naiṣkarmya Siddhi*, 4.62.

> Every vice troubles and obscures the fair glory of holy chastity, for it is like a bright mirror which is clouded and darkened, not only by contact with impure and defiling things, but by the mere breath of man. It is impossible for man to attain to any spiritual grace, so long as he is inclined to carnal concupiscence and therefore, whithersoever thou turn thyself, thou shalt never be able to attain to spiritual grace until thou canst master all the vices of the flesh. Therefore, fight valiantly against thy frail and sensual flesh, thine own worst enemy which wages war against thee day and night. And know that he who shall overcome this mortal enemy of ours has most certainly defeated and discomfited all his other enemies, and shall attain to spiritual grace, and every degree of virtue and perfection.[7]

Brahmacarya is, undoubtedly, the first thing required in spiritual life. And people who are not prepared to observe perfect continence in thought, word and deed will never be able to remain on the higher plane, even if they obtain some glimpses of higher truths. They will fall down again and again, and the highest realization and the higher forms of spiritual life can never be attained by them.

Practice of Brahmacarya — physical aids

Now the question is, how to practise strict continence. What are the rules to be observed? First of all, make it a point never to give the enemy a frontal attack. There is an art of fighting the senses which must be learnt. Never be too violent. Sometimes without first creating the right mood, we want to overcome the senses by extreme violence. That is very dangerous and should never be attempted. Sometimes, remaining in a lower mood, we try to control ourselves in a most violent manner without rising to a higher plane. Then, naturally, there come the most violent reactions, physical as well as mental, and our whole progress is retarded or even stopped altogether. So, with an effort of the will we should first raise the mind and create the higher mood, and then with a little force everything is accomplished. We should never court the danger of violent reactions. Regarding this point Brother Giles gives a fine advice:

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[7] *Teachings of Brother Giles* (London: Burns, Oats, Washerbourne & Co. 1935)

> He who wishes to move a large stone or any other great weight and carry it to any other place must try to move it rather by ingenuity than by force. And so if we desire to overcome the vice of impurity and to acquire the virtue of chastity, we must set to work rather by way of humility and by a good discrete method of spiritual discipline, than by a rash and presumptuous use of penitential austerities.

What a wonderful advice! Just think of the lever action; the action of a crowbar, for instance. The simple device enables you to rise heavy weights which you can never move with your bare hands. The fun is, with reference to the things of the world we are so wise and careful, so ingenious and practical; but with reference to spiritual life and practice we are so foolish and careless. But in the case of the great mystics the opposite is true; they were intensely practical on the spiritual side. They were indifferent to worldly prosperity but extremely alert and methodical regarding spiritual matters.

People try to employ various physical means to overcome the sex drive. Some of these have a limited effect but one should not depend on them too much. Swami Brahmananda says:

> There are certain rules which a *brahmacārin* must observe. He must avoid exciting food, oversleeping, over-exercise, laziness, bad company and evil conversations.[8]

Some people try violent physical exercise. Though this takes off the surplus energy, it is never the right method. Those who want to practice *brahmacarya* should see that they don't accumulate more energy in their body than they can handle. If they find more vital energy rising in them, they should reduce their food for a few days.

There is a basic creative urge in all of us. If this is not sublimated and directed to higher channels, it tries to find expression in lower centres. Those beginners who find it impossible to think of God always, who cannot transmute all their energy into meditation, prayer and worship of the Lord, should employ themselves in some creative work. Along with this, studies and deep thinking are also helpful. Always keep the higher centres active.

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[8] *The Eternal Companion,* op. cit., 1978 edn., p. 238

Regulated breathing is a great help in keeping the mind calm. When the mind is restless all sorts of emotions and impulses crop up. Practise rhythmic breathing always. This will give you a sense of control over your entire body and will make your mind alert. But this does not mean *prāṇāyāma* which is dangerous for the majority of aspirants to practise. Instead of that, just practise rhythmic breathing.

One of the most important habits to be cultivated by all is cleanliness of body. Keep your body and clothes clean and pure. Bathing and washing should not be taken only as a ritual as is often done in India. Physical cleanliness must be associated with mental cleanliness. The most important point is to attain purity of mind. Patañjali says:

> By the practice of purity there arises aversion to one's own body and disgust for contact with other bodies.[9]

However this should not degenerate into what psychologist call 'washing mania' which is a kind of mental disease. Commenting on the above *sūtra* of Patañjali, Swami Vivekananda says:

> When there is real purification of the body, external and internal, there arises neglect of the body, and the idea of keeping it nice vanishes. A face which others call most beautiful will appear to the *yogī* as merely animal, if there is not intelligence behind it. What the world calls a very common face he regards as heavenly, if the spirit shines behind it. This thirst after body is the great bane of human life. So the first sign of the establishment of purity is that you do not care to think you are a body. It is only when purity comes that we get rid of body idea.[10]

Holy company is a great help in the observance of chastity. Contact with pure-hearted people who themselves have observed strict continence has a profound influence on struggling aspirants. But in order to profit by this contact, the aspirant should avoid the company of immoral people. Nothing is perhaps more harmful for the maintenance of *brahmacarya* than the company of bad elements.

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[9] शौचात्स्वाङ्गजुगुप्सा परैरसंसर्गः ।
Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra*, 2.40

[10] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 264

Sex control at the mental level

However, through physical means alone one can never control sex which has its roots deep within the personality structure. The most important point is to tackle the problem at the mental level. We find that imagination plays a dominant role in our life. Apart from sex fantasies, subtle shades of sex get mingled with our ordinary thinking. Though Freud undoubtedly exaggerated the role of sex in a normal man's life, there really exists some connection between sex and the imaginative faculty in man. This connection often gets stronger through wrong associations, and as a result many people find themselves imagining the wrong sort of things. There is nothing to get upset about all this, provided one keeps oneself physically aloof from all objects of temptation; still, wrong imaginations and guilt feelings are a great source of torture to so many aspirants. But brooding only makes the problem worse. The problem of imagination has to be tackled in a systematic way.

The main point to note is that the mind should never be allowed to form wrong pictures and brood over them. This is possible only by the practice of producing counter-thoughts. This is what Patañjali advises us to do in his *Yoga-Sūtra*: 'To obstruct thoughts which are inimical to Yoga, contrary thoughts should be brought.'[11] This is an important technique of great help to spiritual aspirants. By constantly thinking good thoughts the whole old bad thought structure can be changed. We may be near a bad or impure thing physically, but at the same time can be very far from it mentally and psychically. In order to remain unaffected, we should raise a strong mental barrier to insulate ourselves on the thought plane. But this is not enough. It is a negative process. We should bring in a positive factor also, i.e. we should think of the Divine or of some holy Personality most intensely, filling our whole mind with that thought. Draw yourself away physically and mentally, and then give your whole mind and attention to the Divine alone, and do not allow it to stray away towards the object of temptation. Do not allow yourself to go near it either physically or mentally. Then, in a very easy and natural way, we learn to draw ourselves away from the things and persons that tempt us, to raise a strong barrier between them and us, and to remain unaffected.

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[11] वितर्कबाधने प्रतिपक्षभावनम्।

Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra*, 2.33

Physical nearness is not the only danger. The person who tempts us may be far away physically, but we feel a tremendous attraction for him or her on the thought plane. So even when the person who attracts us or the object that tempts us is only on the thought plane and not physically near, we should do exactly and scrupulously what we are told to do on the physical plane, i.e. we should in no way communicate with that person, but should dissociate ourselves mentally from him or her, draw our mind away from all thoughts connected with the object of temptation, and raise a strong barrier or even a feeling of loathing or disgust for that person. And, after having done that, we should see that we give all our thoughts and feelings to the Divine alone. Creating a strong dislike or disgust for the object of temptation is not the ultimate solution, but in many cases it proves to be very helpful as a stepping-stone to the sublimation of feelings and desires, and so it should be made use of.

It is a very vital point to do this consciously, deliberately, in a systematic way. At the same time, one may do more of *japa*, practise more meditation and prayer, repeat some elevating passages even if the mind is divided or is in a state of unrest, even if there is a terrible tug-of-war going on in the mind. Somehow or other, in the case of all aspirants, a strong counter-current of spiritual thought is to be raised.

Practically speaking, all our troubles are more mental than physical, and unless there be mental troubles there can never be any physical ones. Unless something in us responds to the outer stimulus, whatever it may be, there can be no object of temptation. So the defect lies in us more than in others.

If we are not able to create the higher mood as soon as the trouble arises, we should first draw ourselves away from the person or object of temptation and then try to create that mood. There should be a conscious, deliberate cutting off in all such cases. Those who are always in a higher mood will experience less temptations. It is only when a man forgets God or his higher Self and dwells on the worldly plane, that temptations come upon him frequently. Always keep a good stock of holy imaginations and ideas, so that you can use them as weapons the moment any undesirable thought or feeling arises and tries to find some expression on the mental or physical plane. Suppose a person attracts you. Raise at once a very intense counter-picture. Imagine that the person is dragging you down and think at the same time strongly of your *Iṣṭam* or Chosen Ideal, setting the picture of your *Iṣṭam* against that of the other person. Thus it becomes easier to evade the subtle charm of the object of temptation and to change the thought and feeling regarding it. But one should love one's Chosen Ideal intensely. Those who love God intensely are not easily affected by the charms of physical beauty and sex.

Another effective way is to merge all forms that rise in you into the light of your Self which is always shining in you and which forms your real nature. Temptations can take place only in the dark regions of the unconscious mind. Direct the searchlight of the Ātman into all these shadowy areas. All the hideous images that lie crouching there will vanish in the brilliance of the Self. Bring all submerged forms into the focus of higher consciousness, and you will see that they vanish at once. Consciousness has such a tremendous power. But few people care to do this.

You see, the whole trouble is this: Our images have acquired reality. We forget that images are only images. Each image becomes, as it were, a real person and haunts us. We should learn to deflate these images and deprive them of life. In the beginning this may be difficult. Then we have to bring in another good image in order to counteract the bad ones.

But the technique of deflating the images must be learned by all one day or other. When you feel drawn towards a person, if you can regard him or her as a mere shadow, as something unsubstantial, then the charm and influence he or she has on you will disappear and the fight would become a very easy one. But generally the attraction is such, and our consciousness so confused and full of wrong notions, that we do not even want to do this in most cases.

More practical suggestions for sex control

Be conscious of your higher centres. Hold on to your higher centre of consciousness (in the heart or head). Then you will find that you are on a higher plane than the person or object that tempts you. You are caught only when you come down. You must always remain on a higher plane. Any kind of strong temptation is preceded by a fall in consciousness. First you fall down from a higher level yourself before you fall into the hands of others. So hold on to the higher centre always.

When you feel your mind going down, say to it: 'Come up, why stay in the lower centres?' Try to cajole it: 'My mind, what a fool you are to run after enjoyments and sex! Aren't you ashamed to do it? You should really know better.' Treat your mind as a friend. Never create an enemy within. You must make your mind your companion and collaborator in spiritual life.

Sometimes, especially in the case of persons who cannot do higher forms of visualization, it is better to do some imagination of human anatomy. Haven't you seen the human skeleton in a museum or a laboratory? Instead of the beautiful form that draws you, you should see the skeleton, the bony structure with its stupid grin. If you wish, you may add blood, entrails, nerves and other disagreeable things to this skeleton. This is not a false imagination after all. It is the truth about the human body. Only we have forgotten this truth. We have got accustomed to seeing only the skin. Even doctors who know everything about anatomy forget this truth.

The most effective means of overcoming the attacks and attractions of sex is to look upon oneself as the Ātman, the Self. We should change our attitude towards ourselves and towards others. We should try to look upon ourselves in a different and truer way. Say to yourself again and again: 'I am not a man, I am not a woman, I am not the body. I am the Self. I am Infinite Consciousness and Bliss, not limited by any attributes. I am not this physical form with which I happen to be associated for some time. I am sexless', etc. If we are able to bring about this change in our outlook and really come to feel it, then our position becomes secure. Drive this idea into the depths of your mind at the time of your meditation, early in the morning and also before going to bed. At first these appear to be mere suggestions. But repeated practice will make this idea a part of your outlook and influence your thinking and actions.

By constant thinking in a certain way a habit is created, and once this is done, everything else becomes easy. And this thinking can be done very effectively and without any great strain if one tries to rise to a higher plane of consciousness. Just take the example of the baby kangaroo. Whenever there is any danger, it just jumps into its mother's pouch. Your centre of consciousness should be for you even as the mother's pouch is for the baby kangaroo. Try to be with your *Iṣṭam* at the higher centre the very moment any trouble arises, and then you are safe. Do not court any unnecessary reaction by acting in too violent a way. The moment you let go the hold on your *Iṣṭam*, you allow your mind to come down and feel the worldly attraction, and then you are lost.

Learn to connect all your thoughts to your *Iṣṭa Devatā*. Those who love their *Iṣṭa Devatā* intensely will not be troubled by lust. The inability to love the Ideal, which seems so abstract, is one of the main causes of difficulty for people in the observance of strict *brahmacarya*.

When we are struggling with our senses and some outward attraction or mental picture, we should have several weapons at hand for use. Never rely on one weapon alone. *Japa*, repeating some holy passage or prayer or intense and one-pointed visualization of a holy Personality, rhythmic breathing, company of holy people, production of counter-thoughts — any one of these could be utilized as the occasion demands.

Change of consciousness — the ultimate solution

What we have discussed above about continence is meant for the beginner in spiritual life. These preliminary practices are necessary until the aspirant is able to go deeper into the problem. The ultimate solution, however, lies in the transformation of consciousness. Sex consciousness is only a part of body consciousness, and unless this body consciousness is overcome, perfect continence in thought and deed is difficult. Unless the aspirant experiences spiritual awakening and his physical consciousness is changed into supersensuous awareness, the sex idea will persist in some form or other.

The *anāhata cakra* or the heart centre must be awakened. One should experience the bliss of supersensuous Light. The craving for pleasure which is at the root of the problem of sex vanishes when this bliss of spiritual experience is enjoyed by the aspirant. In the case of the *brahmacārin* or celibate, all other desires get some kind of satisfaction. But the craving for sex is not satisfied. This problem can be solved only when he experiences the bliss of the heart lotus. When the heart centre awakens, one sees the light of the Self. In the glory and splendour of this light, the beauty of physical body and sense cravings disappear. This is the only way to overcome the fascination for women that many men feel.

When the aspirant comes down from that higher experience, the memory of that exalted state will linger in his mind and will protect him from earthly temptations which then appear trivial and paltry. He then craves only for spiritual bliss instead of sense pleasures.

So, the problem of continence is directly connected to the larger problem of spiritual experience. The main concern of the aspirant must be, how to get spiritual experience, how to transform his physical consciousness, how to open the higher centre, how to keep the mind on a higher plane, etc. When this supremely important quest occupies all his mind and grips his imagination, the problem of sex will dwindle and fade away.

CHAPTER 14

STRENGTH

One of the important qualifications of a spiritual aspirant is strength — physical and mental. Weaklings have no place in spiritual life. 'This Ātman is not to be attained by the weak', says the Upaniṣad.[1]

Physical strength

First of all, the body must be strong. You don't have to be a wrestler but the body must be healthy and strong enough to withstand the tremendous mental strain and struggles that spiritual practice involves. Do not take a negative attitude towards your body. This body of yours is something noble, a temple of the Divine. You need not identify yourself with it or get attached to it. You may treat it as a house in which you dwell or a machine you operate. Keep it pure and trim. Take regular exercise. *Āsanas* (Yogic exercises) are no doubt good, but if you cannot do all those *āsanas*, you may take some simple exercises in fresh air. I am telling you all this because spiritual aspirants have a tendency to neglect the health of their body. In the early days of your spiritual striving, when you are in the midst of too many conflicts, you may not realize the advantage of having a strong physique. But later on, as your spiritual life becomes smooth and you gain the ability to practise concentration for a long time, you will realize what an asset a healthy body is.

This body of ours is like a boat which enables us to cross the ocean of worldly life. See that it does not spring a leak. Overloading the stomach must be avoided. Take nourishing but light food. Avoid all forms of indulgence. Strict continence is essential for making the brain strong and cool. Those who do not observe continence will find their brain getting heated up quickly. Without continence the brain will not have the power to withstand prolonged meditation.

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[1] नायमात्मा बलहीनेन लभ्यः ।

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, 3.2.4

Just as it is a pleasure to ride a well-trained horse, so it is a source of great joy to live in a healthy and well-controlled body. The sensualist has no idea as to how much joy a chaste and pure body gives. Self-control and purity may be, in the beginning, the cause of tension and suffering, but later on, they become a source of great happiness, peace and contentment.

A healthy and strong mind is, of course, more important. Weakminded people cannot accept a high ideal and pay a high price for it. They are scared away by the struggles and sacrifices that spiritual life involves. Strengthen your mind, strengthen your will.

Tests of mental strength — faith and perseverance

One of the tests of mental strength is faith and perseverance. Only a strong mind can have a firm faith. You must believe firmly, 'I am a being who can achieve something in the world of Spirit.' Success in spiritual life depends on our firmly and steadily holding on to the spiritual ideal. In the midst of all the confusion and darkness of the relative plane we must hold on to a definite course of action, thinking, feeling and willing. Otherwise spiritual life comes to nothing. It often happens that many spiritual aspirants set out with great enthusiasm but soon their fervour evaporates when they meet with various kinds of obstacles, mostly of their own making. Great tenacity of purpose is needed, as Swami Vivekananda always insisted on in the lives of his followers.

Look at the lives of great prophets and saints. Look at the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. What tremendous strength of mind, what gigantic will they possessed! We need something of their grit and determination in order to succeed in spiritual life. Even if we fail, we should never own defeat, never stop struggling. We fall down but rise again. Spiritual life is seldom smooth; rarely does it go in a straight line. But you should not make this an excuse for falling continually. If you persist in your struggles and learn to rise after every fall, you will come to have great strength of mind and power of discrimination.

Ability to take decisions

The second test of mental strength is the ability to take firm decisions. Indecision is always a sign of mental weakness. It shows there are unresolved conflicts within you. And conflicts undermine the integrity of personality. If we remain in a state of indecision for a long time, instead of gaining strength we become weaker. To remain in a state of indecision and then try to make your mind strong is stupid. We must be very decisive in small things. Then we find it easier to take decisions about bigger things. Even the smallest thing in life is to be done consciously, intelligently, decisively, co-ordinating all the faculties — feeling, thinking and willing. Cultivate good habits early in life. A well-regulated life is of great help. If we follow a strict routine every day, many of the little problems of life will not create indecision and worries. Then we get more energy and time for bigger things. Those who find it difficult to decide what to eat, what to wear, how to walk, how to sit and so on — how can such people think about God constantly? We must not lie on the bed and go on thinking for half an hour, 'Shall I get up or not?' Either get up immediately or sleep for another half an hour, but do not remain in an indecisive state. 'Shall I sit for meditation or not?' Decide at once. Indecision is very harmful.

Do your studies, meditation, work, etc. at regular times whether you feel inclined or not. Let not the little things of life nag you constantly and dissipate your energies.

Ability to control even good thoughts

Strength is needed in controlling not only bad thoughts and impulses but also good ones. For very often we find that those who are not able to control their good feelings and impulses are not able to control their bad feelings and impulses either. Feelings, whether good or bad, need to be controlled. Our power to control them must be increased, and that is the most important thing. We should gain mastery over our feelings, be fully conscious and definite.

If we are able to drive a good sentiment deep into our mind, it will colour our very being. Good sentiments and good experiences must be retained within. If we give expression to them too frequently, we will lose their motive power. The driving power of a steam engine comes from the tremendous steam pressure. If the steam be let out too soon, there would not be any driving power left and the engine would refuse to move. The holy feelings and ideas that we gain from books, from contact with holy men, and also from our spiritual practices should be retained within until they effect the necessary transformation of character in us. That is why one is forbidden to tell others one's dream experiences or spiritual experiences. But generally people go about bandying their so-called experiences. This is a sort of enjoyment which has not much to do with spiritual life. Those who are true spiritual aspirants are strong and self-controlled even regarding their spiritual emotions. They may be reserved outwardly but feel intensely within.

If you are not able to manipulate a noble sentiment that suddenly rises in your mind, you will succumb to a bad impulse or sentiment the very moment it rises in you. First create the capital with great doggedness, and then spend the interest. First you must possess a large amount of accumulated capital, otherwise if you spend the capital itself, you will end up in bankruptcy. Have tremendous feeling but be a master of your feelings.

Fearlessness

Another sign of mental strength is fearlessness. Sometimes much of our energy is lost through fear. We should not be too bold and think we are too secure, but the person who is always afraid of falling down is sure to fall, just as the person who is over-confident is sure to slip. As we go higher and higher there is always the danger of our slipping and falling, but that is no reason for our being continually haunted by the fear of falling.

There is no security on the relative plane. God-vision alone can grant us absolute fearlessness. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*

Upaniṣad there is a passage: 'Now, Janaka, you have attained fearlessness.'[2] This is the state of absolute fearlessness which one attains to after Self-realization. The Upaniṣad identifies fearlessness with Brahman: 'Fearlessness indeed is Brahman.'[3] Another Upaniṣad says, 'Fear is produced in a person whenever he perceives duality.'[4] The more we realize our true Self, the more we see the Divine everywhere, and the more fearless we become.

There is another kind of fear — the fear of other people. 'What will others think of me?' Let others think whatever they like. If you are fully convinced that the path you have chosen is right, what does it matter if others say or think something about you? Never yield to others regarding principles which affect your whole life. Never lose the treasures of spiritual life for fear of petty-minded people. In *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* you find the Master telling Narendra that one should take the criticism of others with as much indifference as an elephant has for the barking of puppies.[5]

Further, the Master says that as long as an aspirant has shame, hatred and fear, he cannot make spiritual progress.[6]

It is impossible to satisfy all people. If some disagree with us, many will agree with us. Anyway, we have to do what we think is right, considering all points. Sometimes I go so far as to say that if a man tries to please everybody, there must be something wrong with him. If we try to reflect in us the glory of the Divine, we will find other people changing their attitude towards us automatically.

In dealing with others, we should try to maintain our own balance and at the same time try to do good to them or help them. We should be selfless but we should be so strong that we convince others of our strength. Our attitude and strength should be such that others will not dare to take undue advantage of us.

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[2] अभयं वै जनक प्राप्तोऽसि ।

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 4.2.4 and 4.4.22

[3] अभयं वै ब्रह्म ।

ibid., 4.4.25

[4] यदा ह्येवैष एतस्मिन्नुदरमन्तरं कुरुते। अथ तस्य भयं भवति।

Taittirīya Upaniṣad, 2.7.1

[5] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda, (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 8

[6] ibid., p. 661

If we want to keep quiet when others do us an injustice or when they do something wrong, we must be strong. If we should retaliate, we should be strong. Strength is needed in both cases. And we must be so strong that others feel this strength, even if we do not hit back. There is a way of keeping quiet which makes the other person feel your strength and feel his wrong. He will not dare to take advantage of you again. We should make others feel our strength, not through thoughtless or violent actions, but through our firmness and dignity. The world we live in is so bad and so impure that it will always try to take advantage of us if we are weak. So the first quality that an aspirant should develop is strength, real inner strength, a strength that will not own defeat. But remember this, you may have the strength of a giant but you should not use it recklessly like a giant.

Non-violence

This brings us to another sign of strength, viz. *ahiṁsā* or non-violence. If you practise non-violence out of cowardice, it is no merit at all. Real non-violence means the greatest strength and power of endurance that a man can attain to. It means the greatest courage coupled with the greatest love. It means total absence of hatred. That is what Śrī Kṛṣṇa tried to teach Arjuna in the *Gītā*. He exhorted him to do his duty, which in his case happened to be fighting, without hating others.

Hatred is as bad as attachment. Anger is as bad as lust. Never make a mistake about this. When you lead the spiritual life, do not stand in anybody's way, do not preach hatred or aversion against anybody, whoever he be. Do not try to elbow out others, do not sacrifice others for the sake of your interests or in the interest of those who are dear to you. In the animal kingdom struggle for existence may be necessary because there the law of 'survival of the fittest' operates. But man is not an animal and should not behave like an animal. He must transcend the laws of the animal kingdom and try to reach the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God, the law is love and sacrifice.

The ideal of the spiritual man is to remain unaffected by attachment and hatred. He should have compassion and love for others. A spiritual man feels the miseries of other people more than they themselves do. He has nothing but compassion even for those who behave arrogantly or violently. He always tries to help others even at a great personal sacrifice. But he refuses to be drawn into worldliness in the name of compassion. He refuses to be used by others for their selfish interest.

In this world both the powers are working — *vidyā śakti* and *avidyā śakti* — the power of knowledge and the power of ignorance. The spiritual aspirant must open himself to the former but not to the latter. This may mean a certain amount of hissing but he should not bite.[7] Nor should he entertain feelings of hatred or revenge. He must be very alert about the forces playing all around him.

True *ahiṁsā* is a high ideal. We must proceed step by step towards that ideal. The mind must be cleansed of all unclean thoughts and impulses. We can have real *ahiṁsā* only when we get some real spiritual experience. *Ahiṁsā* as a theory and *ahiṁsā* as practised in one's own life are wide apart. In the *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* you read, 'When a person sees the Self in all people and all people in the Self, then he hates no one.'[8] This is a recurring idea in the Upaniṣads — that Self-realization is the basis of true *ahiṁsā*. When one realizes the Self, one hates none.

But during the early stages of spiritual life an aspirant must be extremely careful in dealing with others. In the name of *ahiṁsā* he should not be too soft and yielding. People who are too soft without any grit will find spiritual life very troublesome. There must be tremendous strength to face the evils of the world. Do not be soft or sentimental where your spiritual progress is involved.

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[7] The reference here is to the well-known parable of Sri Ramakrishna about the snake which was taught to mend its ways by a holy man. See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit. pp. 9, 10.

[8] यस्तु सर्वाणि भूतान्यात्मन्येवानुपश्यति ।
सर्वभूतेषु चात्मानं ततो न विजुगुप्सते ॥
Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad, 6

But we should be strict with ourselves too. We should remove from our minds all ideas of violence, anger and hatred. Sometimes we may outwardly put up with others but burn within with indignation. That is extremely harmful. Practise non-violence within first. That increases mental strength. Only the strong can be non-violent.

Destructive aspect of Truth

Our heart is to be made consciously a cremation ground, the cremation ground of all our attachments, our impurities, our ego. This endless burning is the worship of the Lord, the only true worship there is, and it should never unnerve us. Our trouble is that we worship only a God who gives us pleasure and sense satisfaction. But is not misery also His? Everywhere we worship the God who is the giver of boons. But as soon as we think of Him as the Destroyer, we are afraid. Śiva as a giver of boons is all right. Śiva dancing the mad dance of destruction is horrible! Why? There is no rhyme or reason in our attitude. God is God only when there is creation, when there is preservation — but when there is destruction, God has no hand in it! No, that cannot be. God is God only when He is God in all aspects — when He is the God of creation, preservation and destruction, and above all, the God who is none of all these. So the present-day reaction against the religion of a merely 'good God' is to be appreciated. When you give the modern mind a kind and good God, it will throw Him overboard; but when you give the modern mind the real God, it will, in most cases, accept Him.

God as Creator, Preserver and Destroyer is Mother. Mother again in Her absolute aspect, beyond all these, is Śiva. Thus the relative aspect of God, as it were, is Mother; the absolute aspect of God, i.e. the same Mother in Her state beyond creation, preservation and destruction, is Śiva. Mother is dancing Her mad play of creation, preservation and destruction on Śiva who is lying under Her feet, motionless and unconcerned, appearing to be dead. What wonderful, infinitely deep symbols of Truth all these are!

Why be afraid of death? Death can be glorious. Where do we find the greatest play of Mother? Only in the cremation ground, and the cremation ground is as real and true as the nursery. In life and in death the aspirant should cling to the Mother, and to the Mother alone, giving up attachment or fear for both life and death.

It always happens that he who has a great fascination for pleasant things gets misery. Physical distress is nothing compared to the mental distress and suffering we all have to pass through in life. So we should always know that Truth is beyond happiness and misery, and can only be attained by transcending them both.

Rāmprasād sings, 'O my fickle mind, never stop taking the name of the Mother at all times, come what may. You pass through misery. You may have more. What does it matter?'

No physical suffering can ever be compared to the terrible tempests raging in the human mind, and all these tempests can never be transcended so long as we cling to life in its pleasant aspect, and deny, or try to deny, its terrible aspect. We must be fully prepared to transcend both the good and terrible aspects of God if we really wish to reach Him and acquire peace and blessedness.

It is very important to be able to stand the destructive aspect of Truth. It must first of all burn away all our false hopes, false identifications, pet ideas, all our false worldly aspirations, all our small, petty, greedy loves. Then only will Truth reveal itself, not before. But who really wants them to be burnt? Who wants to pay the price and reach the goal? We have got the means, the methods taught by great saints, but we are so perverse that we always postpone our own efforts and go on deriving intellectual enjoyments from these ideas without realizing their truth ourselves. That is why we remain far away from the goal.

Very often we want to dream of our miserable, contemptible, petty, little dreams of love and power and self-glorification. We want to hug them to our heart's content, and cling to them as long as we possibly can, till they are torn away from us.

As I said, if you are really prepared to follow the spiritual life you must do away with all dreams, gross and subtle, even if they are apparently good ones. There must be merciless scrubbing and cleansing and readjustment within us. A new outlook must be created, sacrificing old notions, pet ideas, prejudices, etc. Tremendous uncompromising boldness is necessary. Those who are manly, who are bold, strong, purposeful and reliable alone can attain to Truth. Not others. It is such a wonderful adventure. In Vedānta there is no place for the weakling, for worms grovelling in the dust, for sinners who go on crying, 'Oh, I am a sinner, I am a sinner, what can I do, I am a sinner', and then merrily and carelessly continue to sin, wallow in the mire, and wail and cry.

Truth is not to be attained by the weak. If purity is ours by birthright, why not manifest purity? If love is ours by birthright, why not manifest love? If bliss is ours by birthright, why not manifest bliss? If freedom is ours by birthright, why go on being slaves to our senses, our body, mind and ego? Break the dream mercilessly! Learn to stand on your own feet, a man's feet, manfully! Swami Vivekananda says in one of his poems:

> Be bold and face the Truth.
> Be one with It.
> Let visions cease,
> Or, if you cannot, dream but truer dreams
> Which are Eternal Love and Service free![9]

Think of the Ātman

Think about the Ātman standing behind your body and mind. That is our real nature. To the extent we dissociate ourselves from the false personality and identify ourselves with the Spirit, we get fearlessness and strength, we get purity and peace. To the extent we identify ourselves with the Divine in us, we become saintly. When a person is outgoing, he becomes a sinner; when he withdraws into his Self, he becomes a saint.

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[9] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1973), Vol. IV, p. 389

The secret of success in ethical and spiritual life is to look upon one's self as a spiritual being, pure by nature and self-luminous in its essence. During our meditation we have to drive this idea into the very depth of our consciousness, and then the pure and self-luminous nature of the Self will manifest even in the body and the mind.

Let those who want to weep over their sins do it by all means. Let us, on the other hand, think of the Divine, the ever-pure, eternal Self, the Ātman, within us and assert Its glory. Let us always try to remember, even when the mind is clouded and inclined towards evil, these wonderful words of Swami Vivekananda:

> Arise, awake! Awake from this hypnotism of weakness. None is really weak; the soul is infinite, omnipotent and omniscient. Stand up, assert yourself, proclaim the God within you. . . . Teach yourself, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come and everything that is excellent will come, when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.[10]

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[10] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,* op. cit., Vol. III (1973), p. 193

CHAPTER 15

INTEGRATION OF PERSONALITY AND INNER POISE

Our centre of gravity

As children we greatly admired a small metal ink-pot which the gypsies used to sell, having a heavy weight at the bottom so that it could never tip over and spill the ink. That was a marvel we could not understand until we learned later that the ink-pot had its centre of gravity always secure within it so that it could not overturn and spill the ink. That was an instance of perfect equilibrium in relation to outside forces such as gravitation.

With reference to the emotions, this is like maintaining inner serenity in the midst of the disturbing events of life. This is poise. How can a human being acquire serenity and poise?

As young men we looked for poise in vain among the elders of our families, and also among our university professors. We discovered it at last in the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. The greatest among those at whose feet we had the privilege of sitting was Swami Brahmananda who possessed serenity to such an extent that he could even impart it to others.

Once two young monks in our monastery had quarrelled and created a disturbance among the others. Swami Premananda, who was in charge, went to Swami Brahmananda, the head of the Order. 'We brother disciples have lived together in peace and harmony for many years', he said. 'What shall we do with these boys? Ought we not to expel them?'

Swami Brahmananda replied quietly, 'Brother, it is true that they have been making trouble; but remember also that they came here to take refuge at the blessed feet of Sri Ramakrishna. They look to you for counsel and guidance. Surely we can do something for them that will transform their lives and bring love into their hearts.'

Swami Premananda replied, 'Brother, it is you who must bless them and transform them.'

Then Swami Premananda gathered all the monks — seniors and novices alike — and led them in a procession to the presence of the great Swami. Now Swami Brahmananda entered into an exalted mood and, as each monk came into his presence and bowed at his feet, he just touched his head in benediction. One who was thus blessed said, 'That touch was like a cooling spring to a fevered body.' Peace reigned once again in the hearts of the monks and in the monastery.[1]

Emotional stability is a wonderful thing to have, but in our age we see very little of it. But it must not be forgotten that the conflicts that appear in the outside world are only a manifestation of what is to be found within our own mind. These troubles may be reduced only if we can take greater care of our own mind and use it judiciously. It is a fact that just as our body is affected by poisons and disease germs, so also our mind suffers as a result of harmful emotions. We are in constant conflict with our environment, but a greater struggle goes on within ourselves. We are our own greatest problem.

Complexes — the cause of conflicts

According to the present-day western psychologists, our inner conflicts are due to some such cause as 'primitive egocentric drives' coupled with a 'forbidding conscience'. Of such, it has been remarked that if their conscience were removed, it would be but a minor operation! Fortunately or unfortunately, however, most of us are not like that. We are eternally in conflict with ourselves. Such instances as self-assertion, mating, acquisition and fright awaken in us the emotions of egotism, pride, lust, jealousy, anger, fear, etc.

Nowadays we hear a great deal about complexes, instincts and emotions. What are they? How are they related? Some psychologists tell us that instincts and emotions conflicting with each other produce complexes. Others use the term in a more generalized sense, and hold that a complex is a group of ideas closely bound together by a common emotional bond. According to some, our instincts and emotions can be grouped under three main complexes: the ego-complex, the sex-complex and the herd-complex. The ego-complex includes the instincts of self-preservation, acquisition, pugnacity, curiosity, repulsion and flight; the corresponding emotions are: a sense of superiority, pride, possessiveness, anger, disgust and fear. The sex-complex includes sex and parental instincts; the corresponding emotions are: love, lust, jealousy, coyness and tenderness. The herd-complex includes the gregarious instincts, suggestion and appeal; the corresponding emotions are: loneliness, sympathy, distress, attachment, helpfulness and trust.[2] Evidently, complexes include almost the whole gamut of our emotional life.

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[1] Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion,* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1971), pp. 76-77

Complexes are common to all human beings. They may be good or bad depending on whether they are used for good or bad purposes, whether they ultimately lead to development and expansion of personality, or destruction and cramping of personality. Instincts of self-assertion, for example, may be given a higher turn. They can be used to control one's passions, using the energy so saved for higher evolution and thus for the good of one's fellow-men. Therefore, there is no need to raise a hue and cry about complexes as some misguided people do. What is bad about complexes is the nature of some of them and the way they are dealt with. Avoiding, forgetting or repressing complexes do not help us much. Nor does unbridled expression of emotions help, whether they are good or bad. What is needed is balance, equipoise. In spiritual men like Swami Vivekananda, we find the spontaneity and freedom of a child combined with the control and purity of an ascetic. The result of this blending is a versatile, supple, creative personality, a source of power and peace.

Psychologists are continually revealing to us how emotions play tricks on us and bring about physical and mental illness of different kinds. On the other hand, proper direction and control of our emotions contribute to health and stability. Dr. Flanders Dunbar in her book *Mind and Body* tells of a psychiatrist who had a woman patient suffering from pains which suggested appendicitis; there were also some indications that the disorder might be psychological. While trying to find out the cause through psychoanalysis, the doctor remembered a similar case of a colleague whose patient had died of a ruptured appendix. He therefore rushed his own patient to the hospital and had her operated on, and as it turned out, just in time.

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[2] Strecker and Appel, *Discovering Ourselves* (New York: The MacMillan Co. 1954), pp. 87, 97, 108

Now the doctor himself became disturbed. The incident took place during the Christmas season and was still fresh in his mind when he was invited to a family party to which he had no inclination to go. He developed a severe abdominal pain. A doctor friend examined him and recommended an immediate operation. But now, the psychiatrist hesitated. As a mental healer he began to trace the cause of his pain, and soon came to the conclusion that the worry over the narrow escape of his patient had given him the idea of appendicitis. Moreover he had had a recent talk with his mother, who had described how his father had died of appendicitis. All this strengthened the perception that his pain was psychological, that perhaps the unwillingness to join the party had brought about an unconscious desire to spend the Christmas Day in the hospital. As soon as the man discovered its cause, the pain left him. He went to the party and enjoyed it.[3]

When such a thing can happen to a trained psychoanalyst, there is no wonder that many of us select comfortable illnesses to suffer from, and sometimes even enjoy them. I know people who create worries if they have none and even magnify them, who periodically get emotionally involved in the affairs of others and create troubles for themselves and for those associated with them. They seem to thrive on tension! If we keep a steady watch over the wanderings of our mind, we can in many cases detect our emotional troubles, put an end to our self-created illnesses, and enjoy health and poise.

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[3] Flanders Dunbar, *Mind and Body: Psychosomatic Medicine* (New York: Random House, 1947), p. 41

Meaning of the word 'personality'

What is personality? The unconscious part of us and the conscious part together make up what is called personality, which reaches out into its environment and in turn is affected by it. When psychologists declare that 'a man's personality is a collection of capacities, habits and attitudes which distinguish him from other men', the question naturally arises: who is it that thinks, feels, wills and acts? What is the constant factor that persists and enables man to consider himself the same person in the midst of changes — changes in body, mind, ego and environment? Philosophy and religion cannot stop with the psychological view. They want to go deeper.

In man — in ourselves — we find that the ego, the mind, the senses and the body, all combine to form a 'complex'. Now, what is the most important factor in man? It is his consciousness. First, *I am* and then I think, I feel, I will, I perceive, I act. We experience our consciousness directly and that of others indirectly. Whatever it is, our individual consciousness seems to be made of the same stuff, although the stuff naturally gets associated or identified with other things which vary from person to person.

Besides the continuous struggle with the outer world, there is also a never-ending conflict in the inner world. So life becomes an incessant adjustment within ourselves and also with the outer world. Lack of poise is due to failure in this adjustment. The eminent psychiatrist Menninger in one of his books observes: 'Our failures are expressed in one of the two types of reactions: flight or attack. Both these reactions indicate instability. Sometimes we want to run away from everything that troubles; self-induced sickness and drunkenness are such expressions of flight. If they are not cured, personality degenerates. The attack-reaction, if properly directed, may bring readjustment resulting in more or less complete poise. Through the right kind of fighting spirit, learning to fight the enemies within, we may attain a measure of poise and peace.'[4]

From the spiritual point of view, however, psychological stability is not enough. Egocentric poise at the psychological level may break down if put to a severe test. Most psychologists would have us believe that a complete resolution of the basic conflicts within us can never be hoped for. This is felt to be true also of the moral and spiritual conflicts we pass through in life. In the case of extraordinary souls who have attained spiritual illumination, however, the victory and poise attained are more complete than anything psychology can ever conceive of.

The individual and the universe

Did you ever consider that the laws of thought ordain that it is not possible for us to have an idea of individual consciousness without having at least a vague idea of infinite consciousness? What to us is a logical necessity, we found well established as an experience in the great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. For them the individual consciousness was a part or an expression of the universal Consciousness. It was this that made them cosmo-centric instead of egocentric. And they made us feel that cosmic Consciousness, which includes all forms of individual consciousness, was a unity in diversity.

To hold that consciousness is the essence of personality does not imply any denial of the mind, the senses and the body, which are the instruments of knowledge and action. Our mind is one amongst many similar minds; our body is one amongst many bodies; so, here too comes the question of the individual and the universal, of the microcosm and the macrocosm on the planes of mind and matter.

Hindu teachers speak of three kinds of *ākāśa*, space: *mahākāśa* or the elemental or physical plane, *cittākāśa* or the mental plane and *cidākāśa* or the plane of the spirit. The individual body is a part of the cosmic body which is like an ocean of matter. The individual mind is a part of the cosmic ocean of mind; the individual ego or consciousness is a part of the cosmic consciousness. The macrocosm is like the ocean, and the microcosm, like the wave. Now, of the two, the ocean and the wave, which is more real? The ocean is certainly more real than the wave. The wave, too, has its reality — but it is a reality dependent on that of the ocean. This is also true of our 'personality' — consisting of our individual consciousness, our individual mind and our individual body, which form parts of a universal consciousness, a universal mind, and a universal body, respectively.

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[4] William C. Menninger and Munro Leaf, *You and Psychiatry* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948)

Here we come to the ancient conception of the cosmic Being out of which all beings and things have come into existence and in which they all live and move. The Vedas say:

> The cosmic Being has innumerable heads, innumerable eyes and innumerable feet. It is He that has encompassed the whole universe and it is He again who transcends it. That Being is this whole cosmos, all that is, all that was, and all that will be. He manifests Himself in the form of all. He is also the Lord and Giver of immortality. The manifested universe reflects His glory but forms only a small portion of His Being; in the main, He remains unmanifest and immutable.[5]

In order to understand the individual we must know something of the universal. Do you know the ancient story of Socrates and the Brahmin sage? A Brahmin sage from India went to Greece and met Socrates who told him, 'The greatest study is the study of man.' But the Brahmin asked, 'How can you know man unless you have known God, the all-pervading Being?' We can get a correct idea of the individual being only in the background of the universal. We can understand individual personality only in the background of the cosmic Personality.

According to the religious view, man is a spiritual being. His personality is made up of not only body and mind, but also of soul. Behind the individual soul which holds together the mind and the senses and the body, is the supreme Spirit, the Nirvāṇa of Buddhism, the Brahman of *Vedānta*, the God of all religions. Being established in this highest spiritual consciousness, a Buddha, a Christ, or a Ramakrishna could laugh at temptations, and even death to them was a passage to immortality. This attitude is not possible for the psychologically conditioned individual or for an ordinary religious human being. The stability which even partially illumined souls attain is much higher than that which psychology can promise. Psychology, however, can render very valuable service. It has its own value as a preliminary technique, but religion goes much farther and achieves results far beyond the scope of psychology.

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[5] 'Puruṣa-Sūkta', *Ṛg-Veda,* 10.90.1-3

One of the important contributions of modern psychology to human well-being is its concept of 'integration of personality'. By the discovery of the unconscious, psychologists have shown that ordinary men usually know very little about the depths of their own minds. The conscious mind usually remains cut off from the unconscious mind which dominates it nevertheless. This creates division and conflicts within the personality. Psychologists like Dr. Jung have stressed the need for integrating the unconscious and conscious parts of the personality.

What is integration of personality?

Now let us consider what is meant by the word integration. An integer is a complete unity, a whole, not a fractional or mixed number. To integrate is to form into a whole, to unite or become united so as to form a complete or perfect whole.

There are various kinds of integration. According to modern physical sciences, matter is composed of molecules, molecules are composed of atoms, and atoms are composed of still smaller particles. Modern physicists tell us that atoms are composed of protons or positive units of electricity and an equal number of electrons or negative units. The protons are concentrated in the nucleus which also contains neutral particles called neutrons. The electrons are extra-nuclear and are supposed to be constantly orbiting the nucleus.

Do you realize that this means that each atom is like a solar system with all its components uniting to form a whole?

The atoms in their turn form parts of a greater whole. Similarly every cell in our body is like a tiny solar system and is an organism by itself. All such units form parts of a greater unit we call a tissue; the tissues in their turn form parts of a greater unit we call the body. In an integrated body, while all the organs have their individual movements, they all must co-ordinate with the general movement. When this is not the case, disharmony or illness is the result. So it is necessary for us to see that our body is properly integrated or harmonized. All parts of body should be healthy and strong and must work in harmony.

Let me now come to the mind. Our mind is a synthetic whole consisting of the faculties of cognition, feeling and willing. How our reasoning, feeling, willing and action are at war with one another and create a terrible confusion within ourselves! There may be conflict of duties, conflict of moral standards, conflict of spiritual ideals. We may become a whirlpool of emotions. So, here too lies the need for integration which stands for purity and strength and harmony.

Let me now consider the ego. We all know that the ego is perverse and how it is constantly changing its centre of gravity. It is now identified with outside things, next moment with the body, then with the senses or the mind. It is mad and is running the risk of tumbling down any moment. How at times it becomes too much one-pointed, centred on itself! We forget that our individual consciousness is a part of an infinite Consciousness; we forget that the welfare of our fellow beings is inseparable from our own; we become egocentric, selfish and mean — a danger to ourselves, to our family and society. So, here too we need another kind of integration.

Thus integration has its physical aspect, its mental aspect, and also its spiritual aspect. In a properly integrated personality the ego or individual consciousness is in tune with the universal Consciousness; and the integrated individual consciousness directs and guides the mind and the body in a harmonious, intelligent and spontaneous way. This is what we understand by integration proper.

Steps towards integration

This may appear to be too high an ideal for many people. But it is good to have a high ideal instead of a low one. However, having the high ideal in view we must follow the path step by step with infinite patience and perseverance. In order to start on our journey we must find out where we stand. This is what we do when we wish to climb the mountains. This is also what we should do when we want to achieve a high ideal in our own lives. We must be realistic, find out the real condition of our body, mind and ego. One of the greatest lessons I learned sitting at the feet of my master and other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna was the ideal of harmonious growth — physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual.

The body — our physical instrument — must be kept fit and efficient. It is necessary for us to have a new attitude towards the body. It is neither an instrument for sense gratification, nor a mass of filth to be hated and neglected. The body is primarily a temple of the divine Spirit and must be kept clean and strong. A Sanskrit passage says:

> The body is like a raft and, with the *guru* as the helmsman and with the favourable wind of God's grace, if a man does not make use of it to cross the ocean of phenomenal existence, he should be called a suicide, a killer of his own spiritual self.[6]

The body must be nourished with pure food which brings energy, strength, health and cheerfulness. Along with proper food we must take fresh air and exercise, avoiding drugs, stimulants and intoxicants.

From disintegration to integration

By becoming a slave of passions, the man in whom the higher moral consciousness has awakened, whose spirit is willing but whose flesh is weak, creates a great discord and disharmony within himself. His personality becomes disintegrated. On the other hand, by giving a spiritual turn to the passions, by sublimating and purifying them, the aspirant comes to possess greater and greater harmony and integration within himself.

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[6] नृदेहमाद्यं सुलभं सुदुर्लभं प्लवं सुकल्पं गुरुकर्णधारम्।
मयानुकूलेन नभस्वतेरितं पुमान्भवाब्धिं न तरेत्स आत्महा॥
Bhāgavatam, 11.20.17

Now we must aim at a still higher integration, and try to co-ordinate our thinking, feeling and willing. Our consciousness is usually associated with one of these faculties which dominates the rest. We may be over-intellectual or too emotional, or it may be that we have too strong a will and want to be active without caring for reason or higher emotions. This creates a cleavage within ourselves. We must co-ordinate the faculties, but how? We must learn to dissociate ourselves from all the faculties and come to our individual consciousness, make it the subject of our meditation and keep it steady. When from this detached state we come back to the faculties, we are able to co-ordinate them and make them work in a spirit of harmony for the common good. This is a great achievement.

A noted psychologist remarks about a patient whose inner conflicts were resolved through analysis, who attained a measure of psychological poise: 'His centre of gravity which had been centred in others came to rest within himself.' It is true that by the right kind of psychological treatment the centre of gravity may be brought to rest deep within an integrated personality, but the highest and surest poise can be attained, in the case of an average mortal, only by passing stage after stage through systematic moral and spiritual practice.

Anger, hatred, untruthfulness, greed, unchastity or helpless dependence on others — these shift the centre of gravity away from our essential integrity and create conflict and discord. On the other hand purity and self-control make us masters of ourselves and generate harmony and peace; in other words, they lead to integration of our personality. The secret of integration of personality lies in where exactly our 'centre of gravity' is. By the term 'centre of gravity' we mean the centre of our consciousness, our 'I'-consciousness. The first step towards integration is to locate this 'centre' in the proper place. Other people may be the centre of our consciousness, in which case our centre of gravity lies wholly outside us, and we are upset by the attitudes of others. Our body or our emotions may be our centre of consciousness. All these tilt our personality and lead to its disintegration. We must first of all separate our 'I'-consciousness and locate it in our innermost soul.

We must learn to discriminate between the seer and the seen, know that our emotions are different from the seer, the true 'I'. We can learn to disentangle ourselves from our emotions. As we learn to look upon them as something different from our true selves, we get the upper hand of them. This in turn gives us the ability to face the realities of life boldly and to control our mind and its activity.

Integration of personality in the Universal Spirit

We saw that the first step towards integration of personality was to locate and fix our centre of gravity, our centre of consciousness in the proper place. The second step is to connect this 'centre', the individual self or ego, with the universal Self. From the standpoint of our highest ideal, the egocentric integration advocated by modern psychologists — however useful it may be in giving our ego a mastery over the mind, the senses and the body — is not enough. We have not yet striven for the highest integration; this we must do next. Dr. Jung writes, in his book *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*: '. . . the ego is ill for the very reason that it is cut off from the whole and has lost its connection with mankind as well as with the Spirit.' [7] In another book he makes a still more significant remark: 'To be in Tao means fulfilment, wholeness . . . complete realization of the meaning of existence innate in things. Personality is Tao.' [8] Tao is the invisible, ungraspable, infinite source of life — the abode of truth, the origin of all things. Tao corresponds to the cosmic Spirit, the universal Being of the Hindu sages.

How are we to bring the ego in touch with the Universal? With the help of prayer or hymns, by repeating mystic words and dwelling on their meaning, by meditating on the divine Reality, we can create such a 'music' in our soul, such a harmonious state within us, that we rise above our little personality, our little ego, our individual consciousness. Then we feel the touch of the true Super-ego, the cosmic Consciousness that lies in us all. It is in this state that the cosmic Spirit is realized to be more real than the individual consciousness. Here the deepest integration takes place. When the soul comes back to normal consciousness, to the plane of the ego, the mind and the body, it feels a remarkable integration. Then the individual consciousness remains rooted in the Universal, and the spiritualized ego remains in tune with the mind and the body which act as its most obedient servants. Here personality remains integrated in the one impersonal and universal Being.

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[7] Carl G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul,* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1953), p. 141

[8] Carl G. Jung, *The Integration of Personality,* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1952), p. 305

Once Swami Vivekananda was visiting a cattle town in western United States. Hearing him speak of philosophy, a number of university men who had become cowboys took him at his word. When he said that one who had realized the Light was able to keep one's equanimity under all conditions, they decided to put him to test. They invited Swamiji to lecture to them and placed a wooden tub bottom up on the ground to serve as a platform. Vivekananda commenced his address and was soon lost in his subject. Suddenly there was a terrific racket of pistol shots, and bullets whizzed past his head. Undisturbed, Swamiji continued to lecture as though nothing unusual was happening.[9] This was spiritual poise born of spiritual illumination by which the centre of gravity had come to rest, not in the physical personality but in the divine Consciousness, the Soul of one's soul. Such illumination brings an entirely new outlook to a man or a woman.

Sufism is the mystical aspect of Islam. Rābia was a woman Sufi saint of the Middle Ages who used to remain absorbed in divine Consciousness. One day somebody asked her, 'Do you love God?' and she replied, 'Truly I love Him.' 'And do you regard the evil one as an enemy?' With a smile the saintly lady replied, 'I love the Lord so much that I do not trouble myself about the evil one.' Her soul was in communion with God and this enabled her to remain unruffled in the midst of the violence and turbulence of the harsh world around her. This is the lesson we learn from the saints and sages. They are endowed with great inner poise. They have integrated personalities and remain unbreakable even under the heavy bludgeonings of chance.

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[9] Eastern and Western Disciples, *Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974), p. 328

Such a rare and blessed personality sees the supreme Spirit within himself and in all beings. His mind is not shaken by misery or overpowered by happiness. He becomes free from attachment, fear and anger. His body becomes a veritable divine temple. He radiates purity and love and becomes a source of abiding inspiration and blessing to all. We have heard from our spiritual teachers that real spiritual life begins only after the attainment of the superconscious state.[10] But for us, that is just an ideal now, and let us not dwell too much on the ideal. Having found the ideal, let us follow the path and move from lesser integration to higher integration. We are assured that as we proceed higher and higher in the scale of moral perfection and integration, we shall enjoy greater and greater poise and harmony, peace and blessedness. Therefore let us awake, arise and move on till the goal is reached.

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[10] Swami Brahmananda says: 'You must attain *Nirvikalpa Samādhi,* where all consciousness of duality is obliterated. Some say that that state is the end of spiritual experience, but I believe it is the beginning.' See Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1971), p. 366.

CHAPTER 16

LOVE OF GOD

True love of God

No man lives without love; only the objects of love differ with different persons. We run after either human beings and sense pleasures or God and divine Bliss. This running after the Divine comprises all phases of spiritual life. The Divine is in us and works through us. As soon as we come to feel this, our whole attitude changes. But first we must become, to some extent at least, conscious of our true nature because our true nature partakes of divinity. The higher self is an essential part of the supreme Spirit. As Swami Vivekananda said: 'Religion is the eternal relationship of the eternal soul with the eternal God.' [1] That is why a clear conception of Truth and Reality is so very necessary for the spiritual aspirant — whether he happens to be a *bhakta* or a *jñānī* or a *yogī*.

Love for God is not blind as love for men and women is. It is always based on some higher form of intuition. It is not love as is understood in the worldly sense of the term. Ordinarily our love flows downward like a stream. Loving God is like turning the river back to its source, the inexhaustible reservoir from which all streams of human love originate.

To the extent we become pure in mind, we come to know of our true higher nature and come in touch with the Divine dwelling within us. In order to achieve this we should go beyond our lower nature. The seeker of knowledge (*jñānī*) wants to control his mind by an effort of will. The *bhakta* or lover of God, centres all his feelings on God. Through one-pointed devotion all our desires are burnt away. Devotion to the Lord serves as the greatest purifying agent in the life of the devotee.

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[1] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1964), Vol. III, p. 4

It is this devotion to God that ultimately unites the devotee and the Divine. But it is not the devotion of the sentimentalist. It is not an emotional effervescence. It is the intense hunger of the soul for the Paramātman, the supreme Spirit. Ordinarily our devotion is a mixture. There is something permanent and also something perishable in it. It is not pure devotion. The devotee wants to get rid of his impurity through self-surrender to the Divine so that he may have pure devotion.

Our sincerity is not always true. In our love for God there is no doubt some sincerity, but this sincerity is mixed up with desires, and is not perfect. In spiritual practice sincerity is an important factor. Sometimes we deceive ourselves by thinking that we are very sincere. A German lady once sought instructions from me. She appeared to be weak. She had just recovered from an attack of illness and was about to go to another place for a change. She wanted to spend that time in meditation. She was eager to realize God. I advised her to improve her health first before seeking instructions. She then asked me 'Swami, do you doubt my sincerity?' I said, 'No, I don't. But your sincerity is mixed with other things.'

The sincerity that comes all of a sudden is short-lived. We love many things and one amongst these is God. Our love for God is at first instinctive, but gradually we must come to feel the presence of the One who is dearer than father, mother and everything else in the world. By *sādhanā* we should make our mind pure and increase the proportion of our love for God that is somehow mixed up with various worldly desires. There must be absolute one-pointedness of love in us. Every feeling of ours must be centred in God, and nothing else must be allowed to attract us and draw away our mind from the Divine. In this way, by consciously and steadily directing all our desires and passions to the Lord, our feelings and sentiments become purified and sublimated. Then we understand what true devotion is. By this process we also avoid the great danger in Yoga, the danger of having concentrated but unsublimated feelings and emotions in us.

We love food, friends, money, property. But this love is centred on our little 'I'. This ego gives trouble, it is the source of all misery. A simple-hearted villager was brought before a magistrate on the charge of deserting his wife. 'Your honour,' he protested, 'I'm not a deserter, I'm a refugee.' Human love often turns out to be intense selfishness.

Just compare this with the relationship that existed between Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples. Words cannot describe the depth and purity of that love. Narendranath (who later on became world famous as Swami Vivekananda) was the foremost of the Master's disciples. The Master loved him dearly and showed his affection in many ways. His very sight would throw him into ecstasy. But once the Master subjected his disciple to a severe test. He suddenly began to treat him with utter indifference. When Narendra came and saluted the Master the latter would become silent, but would start talking with others when the boy left the room. The Master kept this indifferent attitude for several weeks in the course of which Narendra continued to visit him as usual. At the end of a month Sri Ramakrishna asked his young disciple: 'I don't exchange a single word with you, still you come. How is that?' Narendra replied: 'Do you think I come here only to listen to you? I love you and want to see you. That is why I come.'[2] That is unselfish love.

Once Narendra himself told Sri Ramakrishna not to get attached to him. On hearing this, the childlike Master, at once went to the Kālī temple to seek the Divine Mother's advice. The Divine Mother revealed to him that he loved his young disciple because he saw the Lord in him, and the day he could not do so he wouldn't be able to bear even the sight of him.[3] The Master's love for his disciples was not an ordinary love. It was a spiritual kinship based on the direct experience of the immanence of God in all beings. In this form of love it is not the little 'I' but the divine Spirit that is the centre of attraction.

A similar incident is narrated in the life of Śrī Caitanya. When he was staying at Puri he wanted to embrace a devotee who belonged to a low caste. The man shrank back in fear saying, 'Sir, I am of a low caste; you should not touch me.' To this Śrī Caitanya replied, 'What do you mean? I myself am purified by your touch.' The Godman feels the all-pervading presence of the Divine everywhere. For him there is no distinction between low caste and high caste, poverty and wealth.

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[2] Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974), pp. 67-68

[3] ibid., pp. 59-60

Types of devotees

The *Gītā* says that four types of people worship God: the distressed, the seeker of wealth, the inquisitive and the wise. All these are noble souls, says Śrī Kṛṣṇa, but the last one, the *jñānī*, is the dearest to the Lord.[4] What is the meaning of this important statement? The illumined soul sees the Divine in all beings and is constantly united with Him. He is unaffected by evil either in himself or in others. This was the realization the Upaniṣadic seers had. One of them said:

> Thou art the woman, Thou art the man, Thou art the youth, Thou art the maiden, Thou art the old man tottering on his staff; Thou verily dost appear in manifold forms.[5]

As a young aspirant, Swami Vivekananda wanted to remain immersed in *samādhi* always. But Sri Ramakrishna told him that there was a state higher than that, viz. to see God everywhere, in all beings.[6] This is of course a very lofty standpoint.

People are of various types. Their attitudes towards life and God vary widely.

1. The out-and-out worldly-minded people do not usually care for God at all, and they inordinately yearn for the pleasures of life and of the senses and are mortally afraid of misery.

2. Another kind of worldly-minded people do think of God, but look upon Him mostly as the giver of boons,

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[4] *Bhagavad-Gītā* 7.16-18

[5] त्वं स्त्री त्वं पुमानसि त्वं कुमार उत वा कुमारी ।
त्वं जीर्णो दण्डेन वञ्चसि त्वं जातो भवसि विश्वतोमुखः ॥
Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, 4.3

[6] *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, op. cit., p. 131

the giver of material prosperity, material enjoyment. They, too, have a great hankering for pleasures and are afraid of the miseries of life.

3. Some partly worldly-minded and partly spiritual-minded persons cling greatly to worldly pleasures even as they worship God, and try to consider even the unpleasant as pleasant although they feel miserable at the same time.

4. Some matter-of-fact souls without caring for God, take the happiness and miseries of life as inevitable and try to take things as they are.

5. Some spiritual-minded people take both happiness and misery of life calmly as the consequence of their actions, good and bad, and try to live their lives as well as they can.

6. Others take everything as the gift of God, and try to remain unaffected and contented as far as possible while they strive for the path of virtue and duty to the best of their ability.

7. Others take happiness and misery as inseparable opposites in a worldly existence, and not always as rewards and punishments for their actions. They try to live a life of non-attachment, purity, spiritual practice, duty and selfless service, and try to attain to the Divine which is beyond all relative good and evil. In worldly happiness, as in worldly misery, they remain balanced and strive to their utmost to live the higher life, refusing to be disturbed and diverted by the opposites.

In one kind of love the lover thinks of his or her happiness alone. In another type there is the spirit of give and take; the lovers think of mutual happiness. There is a third type in which the lover does not think of his own happiness at all, his whole mind being fixed on the happiness of the beloved.

If in our love of God we do not find peace and joy, there is something wrong with that love. Pure love unmixed with worldly desires is sure to bring us great joy and fulfilment. The Lord often takes away things which we cling to, so that we may attain pure unselfish love for Him. Spiritual life very often means poverty and sorrow at the physical plane, but all these are sometimes necessary to enable us to attain pure love and, through that, supreme Bliss. God is our greatest treasure, and in order to accumulate that, we have to throw away glass beads and tinsel.

The power of divine Love

Do not think of divine Power only in terms of *sṛṣṭi, sthiti* and *laya* (creation, sustenance and dissolution). Think of the power that comes through divine Knowledge, divine Love. Power may be physical, moral, or spiritual. Turn to the original Source of all forms of power, the Divine Mother. Love for the Mother gives you infinite Power. You are only an instrument in Her hands. But the instrument also acts, and remember that, as an instrument, your power is unlimited.

Just as the Mother dwells in you, so She dwells in all — think thus, otherwise the love of today will turn to hatred tomorrow. Our love is correlated with hatred. It should be love for love's sake. If we cannot maintain this attitude, we must at least have the attitude of bartering in the beginning. Then comes a state when you want to give more than you get. The highest state is that when one does not think of oneself at all. One just gives and gives without expecting anything in return.

At present our love is mixed with selfishness. Do you know the story of 'fifty-fifty'? There was a hotel famous for sausages of rabbit meat. Once a customer found the taste had changed. The police was called in. The lady hotel-keeper said, 'Sir, what can I do? Rabbit flesh has become rare, so I added a little of horse meat.' 'In what proportion?', asked the police. She answered, 'Fifty-fifty.' That is, one rabbit to one horse! Our so-called love for others is of the weight of a rabbit, our self-love, of the weight of a horse — fifty-fifty indeed! People, including ourselves, are unreliable. Turn to the infinite Source of Love. We receive a drop of that true Love. It becomes too much adulterated with selfishness. Purify it. Self-love is in everyone. The problem is how to sublimate it. In science, sublimation is the process of purification. Christians call it purgation. That is our life's task — to purify our love.

Increase your love for God, the supreme Self. Then love for others increases. Mother connects us all. First comes personal love. Then we gradually realize that we are souls, parts of the infinite Spirit. Then our attitude towards others changes. Human love is replaced by spiritual kinship.

Attachment gives place to freedom. Selfishness is replaced by service. Increase this love, give it to others, treat others with dignity. Think of the divine Spirit in each one. Family love or friend's love is all selfish. Know that this love is only a drop of that infinite Love associated with God. Try to connect it with divine Love. After your spiritual practice salute the Lord in your father, mother, relatives, friends and even in those who dislike you. Try to love everybody selflessly.

We must rise to a plane of consciousness which is beyond all desires and impulses — good and bad ones alike. Always remember that from good emotions to bad emotions, it is but a short way. Keep your emotions under control and learn to direct them into spiritual channels. Be careful when you try to express your love for another person on the physical plane. If you truly love a person you should try to serve him in a detached way. If you cannot, withdraw and silently pray for him. Spiritual aspirants who have already attained a degree of mental purity should be extra-careful in externalizing their desires and wishes. They should be particularly careful about soft emotions and feelings.

Our mind is to be watched constantly. If it is careless regarding small things of daily routine, it is bound to be careless regarding meditation also. We do not get a new mind when we sit for meditation. It is the same old mind, and if it is habituated to wandering at other times, how can you expect it to be quiet during meditation? To the extent we are able to love the Divine and feel an interest in serving Him, to that extent spiritual practice becomes more and more steady and fruitful.

Smuggle in the Divine in some way or other, even when you are engaged in work, even when the mind tends to run after worldly things. Divine love alone must be cultivated; it can be done through unremitting practice. A greater portion of the mind must be awakened, must be made conscious, than is being done now. Make the Lord the polestar of your life.

A person who cannot love God cannot really live a spiritual life. The greatest thing in spiritual life is to transmute our human love into love for the Divine. Even in the worst kind of attachment there is a core of pure love. When the dross is burnt away pure love is left behind.

Know for certain that if, for one reason or other, a human being may drop you, the Lord can never do so because we are, as Śrī Kṛṣṇa says, an eternal portion of the Divine.[7] Turn all your love to Him and learn to love others through His love. That is, learn to love others not through personal love, but through the Divine and for the sake of the Divine. A little touch of God's pure love for man must be there in our love for others.

The Godward turn

The ego asserts itself again and again. So, as Sri Ramakrishna says, make it the servant of the Lord.[8] Desires and passions refuse to be controlled. Give a Godward turn to them, maintaining their intensity. Instead of yearning for the company of men and women, yearn for union with the Divine. Seeing Him alone can satisfy the hunger of the soul. He alone can fill its void and give it permanent peace and joy.

Instead of being angry with those standing in the way of your gross and subtle sense enjoyments, be angry with all the obstacles lying in the path of the Divine. Learn to be angry with your lower desires, with your turbulent passions, with your very anger, and avoid them all as your great, relentless enemies. Instead of wishing to possess another 'human doll' or fleeting worldly wealth, covet the Divine and His inexhaustible spiritual wealth which can never be lost and is alone able to give us abiding peace. The *Bhāgavatam* says, 'Lust, anger, fear, affections, fellowship and friendship, when directed towards the divine Being, lead to union with the Divine.'[9]

At the touch of the philosopher's stone all the base metals of desires and passions, of greed and anger, lose their evil nature and are transmuted into pure devotion bringing bliss and immortality to the soul. 'Even if a very wicked man worships Me, the Divine, with devotion to none else, he should be regarded as good, for he has rightly resolved. Soon does he become righteous and obtain eternal Peace. Boldly canst thou proclaim that My devotee never comes to grief', says Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad-Gītā.*[10]

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[7] *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 15.7

[8] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 103

[9] *Bhāgavatam*, 10.29.15

It may happen that a person is fully convinced of the evil effects of desires, but still is not able to rid himself completely of them. What is such a person to do? How can he rise above them? One way is to control them using will power. Another is to cultivate the witness attitude towards them. Neither of these is easy and, in the beginning of one's spiritual life, well nigh impossible. What then is the way for a spiritual aspirant? He should connect them all, directly or indirectly, with the Divine. Every desire, every sensual impulse, every passion, must be given a Godward turn consciously and knowingly, with an effort of the will. If his artistic sense and his desire to enjoy art are very strong, he should take up some holy form of art and make that a stepping stone for rising to the plane of the Divine. Instead of listening to worldly music, let him listen to devotional music; instead of singing for other people, sing for the sake of the Divine; and so on. If he is very fond of the sweet fragrance and beauty of flowers and wishes to enjoy them, let him pluck flowers, offer them to the Divine and decorate with them the holy altar artistically. If he desires to love somebody or feels greatly attracted towards somebody, let him love the Divine in that person and be thereby directly drawn towards the Divine.

If done consciously and knowingly, all these act as a great controlling factor, as a great regulating agency, helping us in sublimating our desires, in giving them a higher turn and in attaining greater purity. But even here the ultimate goal to be attained by the aspirant is perfect control of mind and realization of God. Everything else serves only as a stepping stone to that. Following the graded path we must be able to rise to the highest stage of pure spiritual Love sooner or later.

The Godward turn must be given to our relationships with all external objects. The Divine is everywhere and in everything, but in order to be aware of it we should learn to become more wide-awake and conscious. We should be more reflective and act less on the impulses of our senses and instincts, be they good or bad. We are so careless and easy-going in all this that we follow the opposite course and bring no end of troubles to ourselves.

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[10] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 9.30,31

We should fully recognize this idea of the unity of all souls in God in the right way. At present we recognize it so half-heartedly. And properly speaking, without acquiring true dispassion and detachment we cannot recognize it wholeheartedly and act up to it. If we are convinced that the one undivided Principle exists in all, we cannot have any strong hatred or any strong animal love for a particular individual, but would only turn our eyes towards the Principle at the back of him or her. This does not mean that we are to behave like fools, and be without discrimination regarding the company we keep. No. We still should know the tiger to be a tiger, in spite of its being a manifestation of the one undivided Principle; and we should not go and try to embrace it. We should know the divine Principle to be present in all men and women, but this knowledge should not prevent us from discriminating and being careful so long as we are on the phenomenal plane. We should see the one Principle at the back of the worldly person leading an impure and immoral life, but we should not go and have intimate talks with him. This is very, very important. And if we do not act up to this rule, our feet will slip one day, and we shall surely come to grief. The aspirant can never be too careful in this. To the extent we recognize the one undivided Principle in all, all our hatred, our so-called human love, our attachment, will diminish and will lose their strength and influence. Wherever we find in an aspirant the desire to mix indiscriminately with worldly-minded people and with members of the opposite sex, we should know that there is something seriously wrong with him. His desires for worldly things and enjoyments have not yet lost their tenacity, no purification of mind has been attained and spiritual progress and realization are altogether out of the question for him.

Ordinarily our attachment clouds our whole understanding. We must be able to stress the spirit more than the form, more than the personalities and sense objects, but so long as our craving for sense enjoyment, our clinging to this little personality of ours, continues to cloud our understanding, we can never really think of the one undivided Principle, and hence we go on committing the same old mistakes over and over again. So dispassion should be cultivated as much as possible by all aspirants. Without it nothing positive can be achieved.

Dispassion has both its negative and positive aspects. We should try to disconnect ourselves from others as much as possible, and then connect ourselves with the Divine, so that, later on, all connection with others can be done only through the Divine, never again in a direct way. Human love connected with the Divine can be gradually transmuted, but if it is not so connected, it degenerates and ends in misery. All our relationships, if they are direct ones, are born with the body and are associated with others through connection of the body only. There is nothing lasting in them that can bring real peace and blessedness to any of us.

Ordinarily there is in us such an awful identification with our body and our senses and passions that we just brush aside God. Wherever there is scepticism with reference to the Divine, there is some inordinate clinging to the ego and to the senses and their objects, because of which God is pushed out. So long as the individual is full of desires for sense enjoyment and possession, full of egotism and vanity, God has no place in his life. If the mind becomes perfectly free from desires and passions, one realizes the Divine then and there. So, if we do not realize God, if we do not get even a glimpse of the Truth, we need not ask why it is so. We should know that in the unconscious and subconscious parts of our mind there are still strong desires in us, and we should first rid ourselves of these obstructions. So long as we allow them to remain, the question of God-realization does not even arise.

We should break the sway of impulses over us. The very moment the impulses rise in us, we should try to expand our consciousness, for then these impulses at once disappear just as the waves disappear in the ocean. The man who knows how to expand his consciousness, how to attain to a higher form of consciousness, is not affected by such impulses that rise in his mind. One of the most effective means to rise above one's impulses is to come in touch with the divine Consciousness, with that infinite Presence which is always in us, and then connect all our thoughts to It alone.

Merge all false iṣṭams into the true Iṣṭa Devatā

How much time we waste in being social! How much time we spend in thinking about others! It is just like meditation — so intense, but calling up false images and false feelings. This is not the way to progress in spiritual life. We must rise above the little dolls and puppets, to Him who pulls their strings, who makes them dance their chaotic dance. When we dispassionately look into ourselves we see what funny things are happening inside us. Instead of busying ourselves with others, if only we devoted all that time to our *Iṣṭa Devatā* or *Iṣṭam*, what wonderful progress we could make! What is the marionette without Him who holds the strings and moves it? Where is the importance of the marionette? So, why all this attraction and aversion, why all these likes and dislikes, instead of centering all our emotions on our *Iṣṭam*? The *Iṣṭam* is always there within you. He never leaves you in the lurch, never disappoints you, never brings you misery and frustration, but you must know how to make Him your very own, how to be in His company, how to consecrate yourselves to Him alone. Unfortunately, it sometimes happens that we have not got enough love for our *Iṣṭa Devatā*. We mostly think of human beings and want to be enslaved by human puppets. If we make a holy Personality our *Iṣṭam*, then we are saved from thinking of these hundreds and hundreds of false human *iṣṭams* tying us to the phenomenal world and preventing our spiritual progress. Without rising above them all, we will never know what true love and freedom are.

First of all, our attitude towards ourselves is wrong. Then naturally our attitude towards all others becomes wrong. Be on your guard; analyze your thoughts mercilessly. Do not allow puppets to forge invisible fetters and bind you to them. If we watch our thoughts during the day, we find hundreds of worldly *iṣṭams* instead of our Chosen Deity occupying our thought life and our emotional life. We must cling to our real *Iṣṭam* and dissolve all the false *iṣṭams* into the true *Iṣṭa Devatā.* There is no other solution, however painful this may be for the beginner. Always have the undercurrent of your mind connected with your *Iṣṭam.* Try to replace all other forms that attract you or repel you by the divine Form — then your life will be happy and free from all attachment, and will be really fruitful. It will know no frustration.

Sometimes when you think of some people you shudder, sometimes you feel hatred, sometimes you feel a strong sexual attraction, the so-called love. If you consciously and intensely connect all these feelings at once with your *Iṣṭam*, you save energy and avoid all these disturbances. When the thoughts of other persons come, replace them by the thought of your *Iṣṭam*, always replace their forms by the luminous form of your *Iṣṭa Devatā.* Thus you minimize the waste of your energy, and not merely that: this practice has a great spiritual value.

Because we have got still too much body consciousness we still think in terms of bodies. When you find the thought of some person arising in you which is useless or even dangerous, either attractive or repellent, but not contributing to your spiritual development, replace it at once by the thought of your *Iṣṭa Devatā*; think this thought intensely and do *japa.* The Divine should occupy our whole attention. As Swami Vivekananda says in his book *Inspired Talks,*[11] our daily necessary thinking can all be done through the Divine.

The human mind is creative and is bound to create something or other. If you do not consciouIsy direct this creativeness along the proper channel tending to higher forms of creation, it will be creative on a lower plane. The best way to control the harmful activity and creativeness of the ordinary person would be to give his energy a higher turn. There is physical creation, mental creation, spiritual creation. Why not go in for higher and the highest forms? We want to be dynamic on the physical plane. Why not be dynamic on the spiritual plane as well?

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[11] Included in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,* op. cit. Vol. VII, p. 9

In one of his poems, Rāmprasād, the great eighteenth-century poet-saint of Bengal sings:

O mind, I tell you this:
Worship Kālī in any fashion you please,
Repeating day and night the *mantra* given by your *guru*.
Consider lying down as prostration;
And sleeping as meditation on the Mother.
While eating, think you are offering libations to Her.
Whatever you hear by your ears, all that is the *mantra* of the Mother.
Kālī embodies the fifty letters (of the Sanskrit alphabet) assuming names letter-wise.
Rāmprasad is happy to proclaim that the Mother pervades all beings.
As you go about the city,
Think that you are going round the Mother.

The idea behind this beautiful song is to connect every activity with the Divine consciously.

Don't be religious fanatics

In the West we come across a number of people who want to meditate on the Absolute. It is difficult to convince them of the need for divine Forms as stepping stones to meditation on the Formless. What has actually happened in their case is this: they do not feel attracted to the divine Personality that has been thrust upon all without distinction. If they are asked to meditate on some other divine Personality who appeals to their temperament, they are willing to meditate on Him, and this will definitely help them in making spiritual progress. But this meditation on a divine Personality should not make us fanatics. We should have the breadth of vision to understand that all holy Personalities are special manifestations of the supreme Spirit.

Most of our religious or dogmatic quarrels are due to our partial visions of the Truth. We only rise to a certain plane, look at the Truth from that plane, and begin to quarrel with others who too have had only partial visions different from ours. We forget that what we know is only one of the several aspects of the Truth. Partial visions are true on certain planes of consciousness, but they are not the whole Truth. Only by rising to the Absolute can we realize the Truth as it is, and then assign to each partial vision its proper place.

In India this principle was recognized even in the earliest ages, and there has not been much of religious persecution and sectarian bigotry in this country. In India the mistake of standardizing spiritual life and proclaiming only one Incarnation as the true one was not committed. Theological narrow-mindedness has been the cause of spiritual death in the West.

When we worship Christ, we come to have Christ consciousness. When we worship Kṛṣṇa, we come to have Kṛṣṇa consciousness. When we worship Sri Ramakrishna, we come to have Ramakrishna consciousness. And each can lead us to the Absolute-consciousness, for all these great ones had realized their identity with the Absolute. Each Incarnation acts as a door, as it were, to the Absolute. If the Christ-personality does not appeal to me, I cannot profit by worshipping Christ, and my whole spiritual life will become a failure. I must follow that great One who suits my bent of mind, who satisfies my ideal. The man who should follow Christ should not be told to worship Buddha or Kṛṣṇa, for then his spiritual life will be a failure. Religious fanatics generally do not realize this important truth. Themselves blind, they want to keep others also blind. The great Incarnations and prophets of world religions are all expressions of the same divine Principle. There is not just one Saviour for all. To force one Saviour on all is a most pernicious idea.

Fanaticism is not restricted to worshippers of Incarnations alone. Even Advaitins can become fanatic. To proclaim to everyone that gods, goddesses and Incarnations are all illusory, being products of Māyā, is the height of foolishness. Even the Advaitins must realize the divine Immanence in all creation. For many people *saguṇa* Brahman is as important as *nirguṇa* Brahman. The way to the transcendental Absolute lies through the Immanent. First we must realize the Divine within ourselves, then in others, and finally transcending all names and forms, we should realize the One-without-a-second. We should always remember that names, forms, attributes, etc. are all unreal only for a person who has reached the Absolute — not for others.

In the all-comprehensive conception of Sri Ramakrishna the infinite Spirit which is beyond all names and forms manifests Itself as all souls, as Īśvara, the Ruler of all souls and the universe. He again manifests Himself as the gods and goddesses. He also manifests Himself as the divine Incarnation.

The Infinite is beyond the grasp of the mind, *avāṅmānasa-gocaram*. And, in order to realize that, the aspirant should begin with the world of manifestation, should take up some holy Form and holy Name. The holy Form is a special manifestation of the supreme Spirit. It gradually takes us to That. The holy Name too is a special manifestation of the infinite Spirit. Just as the Form takes us to the Formless, the Name takes us to the Nameless.

The trouble with us ordinary spiritual seekers is that we cling to our own individual form, may be a man's form or a woman's form, and attach ourselves to a holy Form, that of a male Deity or a female Deity. And we are not prepared to move from this comfortable position. Unless we are first of all dislodged from this materialistic conception of ourselves and of God, we cannot make any progress in the real sense of the term. I don't say it is bad to think that you are a devotee and worship a male or a female God. It is indeed very good and necessary, but don't think that it is the highest stage.

Although we cannot in our present stage meditate on the infinite Spirit, we can at least do some *bhāvanā* or imagination. We usually think that our own form is absolutely real, our personality is absolutely real. Let us first of all think that we are all souls distinct from the body and the mind. Let us visualize our soul as a point of light which is a part of the infinite Light of God. Strongly visualize an ocean of Light standing at the back of your self and supporting it. Merge your body and mind in it. Let us at least have this *bhāvanā* to undermine the materialism of the type of worship that we usually follow.

At the beginning of our spiritual practice, it is always good for us to remember that we are souls. Each soul has put on a mental body and a physical body to play a part in the drama of life. The drama of life is to be played well. Let us not think that the drama of life means only the worldly life. It is also the drama that is to be played in the world of thought, in the world of the Spirit.

Love for the Personal-Impersonal

Each one of us has raised a thought world around himself, and this limits our vision. How has my form arisen? How did my individuality originate? If we think in this way, we find our 'I' tending to disappear into the formless Reality. When we study the lives of the great Incarnations we find that they all had realized their identity with the supreme Spirit.

When we come in touch with their consciousness we too are freed from our limitations. The bonds of our limited existence burst, and we too experience cosmic Consciousness. We are like bubbles, but the great Incarnations are mountain-high waves, always fully conscious of their true nature, always in dynamic contact with the ocean. Ours is impure, limited consciousness. Theirs is pure, unlimited Consciousness. The Personality can be merged in the Principle, but the whole Principle can never be identified with the Personality. Behind the divine Personality and our limited ego there stands the indivisible *Sat-Cit-Ānanda*. Through the intensity of our feeling we can give such a stimulus to the cosmic mind that a radiant divine Form arises out of it. Or if the Form does not arise, we feel Its presence.

If you throw a stone into a lake you see the reaction in the form of ripples, but you do not create the lake for all that. The water always exists, the stone only gives the stimulus to raise a wave. In the same way, the cosmic Consciousness always exists; when you pray intensely, it acts as a stimulus and a divine Form arises out of the Formless. But there must be intensity of love. Intensity is one of the principal factors in the life of an aspirant. It is the intense soul hunger that produces the divine response. That is true *bhakti*.

As the aspirant advances in spiritual life he finds that the Form that rises out of the Formless merges back into It. Love for the Personal God then changes into love for the Impersonal Absolute. The true devotee sees everything in proper light. He knows that the Form and the Formless, the Personal and the Impersonal, are but two aspects of the same ultimate Reality. Having risen above the clutches of the worldly attachments, his whole mind and heart are given to the contemplation of God. He loves God in all His various manifestations. There are no limitations to his love.

CHAPTER 17

SELF-SURRENDER

Divine strength

Spiritual life is meant only for the strong. However, by strength we mean not only physical strength but also mental strength and spiritual strength. By the exercise of will power and practice of austerity one gains tremendous inner strength. But apart from all these there is another strength — the strength of the Divine. The true devotee feels that he is under the protecting care of the almighty Divine and he feels infinite strength. Sūrdās, one of the great North Indian saints of the Middle Ages, sang: 'By the grace of the divine Youth of Brindāvan I have understood that Rāma is the strength of the weak.'

Self-surrender to the Divine is in itself a mighty form of *sādhanā*. It is not as easy as people think. What people generally can do is to pray to God and depend on Him at different times of the day, and offer their body, mind and soul at the feet of the *Iṣṭa Devatā* repeatedly.

In the *Bhagavad-Gītā* Śrī Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna:

> The Lord dwells in the hearts of all beings, and by His Māyā causes them to turn round and round as though mounted on a machine (just as a puppet-player moves the puppets).
>
> Take refuge in Him with all thy heart; by His grace shalt thou attain supreme Peace and the eternal Abode.
>
> Thus has the profoundest wisdom been declared to thee by Me. Reflect over it fully and act as you like.[1]

When we draw ourselves away from Him, we become more egocentric and fall from the higher path. Instead of taking our stand on the ego, let us surrender to the Divine and make Him the centre of our consciousness. And then ethical and spiritual life become easy. We should practise prayer, intense prayer, when lower tendencies come up. And then we will find some power coming and lifting us up.

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[1] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 18.61-63

The blessing of uncertainty

From a spiritual point of view it is good to remain amidst great uncertainty. It is often good if everything you relied upon is taken away from you and you are left without any worldly support. It is good if all old values, friendships and attachments are broken, and you find all that you had clung to disappearing into the blue. It is good that all forms of external consolation, all hopes in other people, crumble. For then you will be forced to turn to the Divine, who alone is our eternal and only true friend and guide.

This experience is very painful, but for many people it is very necessary. Otherwise they forget God and their own spiritual destiny. You do not know anything about your own future. You cannot rely on perishable things. But that is what people do. Sometimes the treatment is more painful than the disease, but one has to undergo it. The stronger the disease, the stronger must be the treatment. And in the West this disease of 'woman and gold' has become most virulent. So it requires strong injections and medicines. In the case of every disease there is a curative crisis and this is a step leading to perfect cure.

Sometimes I pray to the Lord to send the devotees misery and trials, to make them suffer and pass through hardships, so that they may come to their senses. Māyā is so powerful that people forget all their past sufferings and just go on in their old ways. Something is needed to remind them constantly of the Divine.

All suffering is for our training. Our instincts are to be controlled and burnt in the fire of spiritual striving. When the iron rod has become crooked it needs some hammering. Sometimes in our egotism we forget that we are delicately poised in between the hammer and the anvil. And so when the hammer falls, we suddenly wince and exclaim 'Oh what has befallen me!' In the first place, who asked you to get in there?

Suffering need not be on the material plane alone. In the case of spiritual aspirants dry periods are common when they don't feel the original spiritual fervour, when they find themselves in the 'dark night'. This experience can be as painful as the sufferings of a worldly man.

Egotism — the main cause of suffering

People very often neglect or forget God's grace. They become overconfident in their own strength and become careless. This may even lead to arrogance. There is a funny story in our old books. Once there was a tiny mouse in the hermitage of a sage. One day a cat fell upon it. The sage took pity on it and transformed it into a cat. Then some dogs tried to tear this new cat to pieces, and so the sage changed it into a dog. The poor dog was persecuted by a leopard and so the sage transformed it into a tiger. But when it became a tiger, it wanted to kill the sage himself. Then the sage said, 'All right, just be the old mouse again.'

A similar thing happens in the case of spiritual aspirants too. Divine Grace is showered on them which purifies them to a certain extent and they are able to attain a certain amount of concentration and freedom. But then they become egotistic, begin to think too highly of their attainments and become careless or go to the extent of abusing and reforming the world. Then suddenly the grace is withdrawn, and they find themselves alone, facing a terrible void.

We should all bear in mind that those who really and truly follow the spiritual path are less egocentric and more selfless, kind and considerate towards others. We have to be givers and not beggars. When it comes to material things most of the people are beggars, they want so many things from others, and yet they are egotistic! The less the ego, the greater the joy and peace, and the better our work.

Do not think lightly of your spiritual blessings. You need not constantly brood over your weaknesses and past mistakes but should cultivate alertness of mind. Constant discrimination is essential even in the path of devotion. Constant alertness of mind is essential to profit by the blessings that God is showering on us. As Sri Ramakrishna has said, if you walk one step towards God, He comes to you ten steps.

Convert suffering into spiritual strength

True devotees of God do not pray for wealth or material benefits. They do not even pray for the removal of suffering. What they pray for is strength to bear their sufferings. There is a fine song by Rabindranath Tagore:

> Lord, give me the strength to bear Thy standard to whom Thou hast been pleased to give it. Give me the devotion to bear the greatest pain that is unavoidable in Thy service. Thou mayest fill my heart with great pain.
>
> I do not want even to get rid of this gift of suffering that Thou art giving me with Thine own hands. This misery will be my crest-jewel, if with it Thou givest me also devotion to Thee. Give me work as much as Thou likest, if Thou dost not allow me to forget Thee, nor my heart to get itself lost in the entanglements of the world.
>
> If Thou wishest, do Thou bind me as much as Thou likest but keep my heart open to Thee. Do Thou not allow me to forget Thee on any account.[2]

And then there is the beautiful prayer of Kuntī to Śrī Kṛṣṇa:

> O, Teacher of the whole world, let calamities come to us from all directions, for they enable us to have your vision which puts an end to the cycle of rebirths.[3]

Since we are going to have unpleasant experiences anyway, it is better to have them utilized for higher spiritual life. Nobody can avoid pain, suffering, humiliation in some form or other in his life. As it is, let these goad us to a higher purpose. Let us use them as stepping stones to the divine life. This does not mean that we should go out of the way and seek troubles for ourselves, as some people try to do. We should court neither suffering nor pleasure but seek the Divine alone which is beyond both.

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[2] The song beginning with *tomār patākā jāre dāo* by Rabindranath Tagore in *Naivedya*, 20

[3] विपदः सन्तु नः शश्वत्तत्र तत्र जगद्‌गुरो ।
भवतो दर्शनं यत्स्यादपुनर्भवदर्शनम् ॥
Bhāgavatam 1.8.25

Divine Grace may not necessarily remove all our physical miseries and sorrows, but if we have the Grace, we can pass through the fiery ordeal of life successfully, burning the dross in us in the process. This increases our inner purity and spirit of surrender. Blessed are our sufferings if they bring us clearer knowledge and steadier devotion. The more I see life, the more I understand that divine Grace does not necessarily mean removal of our troubles. But it always gives the devotee a wonderful inner poise and strength to face all trials and difficulties, makes him purer, and enables him to feel the divine Presence which brings an inner peace even in the midst of the greatest sufferings. Real peace is not like sleep. It is a calm state of mind that enables you to remain unmoved in the midst of the troubles and difficulties and be in touch with a vaster Reality. People who run away from the difficulties of life weaken themselves more and more. People who constantly seek pleasure and avoid their duties remain stunted. They never attain their full spiritual stature and are unable to utilize the grace that the Lord is ever ready to shower on them.

Let us make the best use of the Grace that is already showered on us. Let us make the best use of the time and advantages that we have got instead of complaining about lack of time and disadvantages and, in a spirit of surrender, let us strive for God-realization. We should strive for more divine Grace and more love for the Divine than for the paltry things of the world which only tend to make us forget God and our spiritual destiny.

We should always be in a mood to rush towards God.

Karma and divine Grace

Certain forms of *karma* are to be worked out through suffering. So when the latter comes we should feel somewhat relieved, for suffering indicates that so much of the burden of *karma* is reduced. Besides, the helplessness brought about by suffering may be utilized spiritually by practising self-surrender to the Divine all the more. In pain and pleasure, in life and death, the Lord is our own. He is the Soul of our souls, the Life of our lives.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that diseases are the taxes we have to pay for living in the body.[4] We have to pay these taxes sometimes in heavy instalments. And then for sometime there may be a respite. The Master was often heard to say during his last illness: 'Let the body feel the pain, but O my mind, do thou remain in bliss.' [5]

Move onwards without trying to run too fast. If we try to run fast, we may have to pay for it with compound interest. God-realization is certainly the goal, but this has to be reached not merely through spiritual culture, but also through proper and necessary action. What we should by all means avoid is improper and unnecessary action. Hence we should be careful both about the inner ideal and the outward action. Proceed slowly and steadily, exhausting your *karma*. Be in tune with the Divine within and also be careful about what you do. We must correct ourselves always both on the thought plane and on the plane of action.

Most people suffer because of the discrepancy between their spiritual aspiration and the grim reality they have to face in worldly life. This suffering by itself is not an evil. It may even be for one's good, if it acts as an incentive to find an inner spiritual readjustment. One may then gradually feel that one is not really of the world, even if one has to live in the world.

In a certain sense, we all get what we deserve. We wish for a thing, we get it, and along with it also the good and the evil which are inseparably connected with it. We seek some forms of happiness and then, as Swami Vivekananda says, 'Happiness presents itself before man wearing the crown of sorrow on its head.'[6] We cannot accept the one without the other. We wish for the satisfaction of some worldly desire. We may get the object of desire but we get also the trouble associated with it. Our present state is the result of our past as well as our present worldly desires. Let us learn to be as desireless as possible, to adjust ourselves to the circumstances that we ourselves have brought about, and then rise above them. Let us work out our destiny and learn to depend on the Divine more and more as we work out our *karma*. Then the world will become our training ground, and through it we will be able to reach the Divine. Then, even if we continue to remain in the world outwardly, we will be no more of it; we will be the Lord's wherever we be.

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[4] *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1975), p. 133

[5] *Life of Sri Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974), p. 489

[6] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1973), Vol. V, p. 419

Play of the Divine Mother

Everything is the play of the Divine Mother. She comes to us in different forms — as the teacher and the student, as the friend and the enemy. Let us then play our part as best we can, at the same time witnessing our play with detachment.

Whatever we see around us, whatever happens to us, is the manifestation of Her sport, Her *līlā*, Her joy. Sometimes the devotee says, 'Mad Woman, what are you doing?' when he sees Her indulging in one of Her pranks, playing with human hearts producing pain and pleasure. Sometimes we do not find any rhyme or reason in the whole cosmic process, but this whole cosmic process in its madness, its cruelty, its pain and pleasure is but the manifestation of the mad frolicking spirit of the Mother, of the joy She has in Her play. We too should enjoy Her play and take it as play, performing parts as actors but knowing that we really have nothing to do with it, that it is all for the sake of the great fun of the game.

Many of the songs which Sri Ramakrishna used to sing (they were mostly composed by Rāmprasād and a few other poet-saints of Bengal) are symbolic representations of the cosmic process. The crude mind of the worldly person takes them in a crude way and thus misses their whole inner meaning. Their symbolism is really marvellous and expresses the Truth in a very striking way as far as the Truth can ever be expressed in words. Sri Ramakrishna specially liked a song about the Divine Mother flying kites. We are all kites that the Mother is flying in the sky, and we are tied by separate strings so that we cannot get away. But some very clever kites manage to cut the string and fly away never to return, and then the Mother, beside Herself with joy, claps Her hands though She Herself had kept the kites tied to the string.[7] So what we have got to do is to cut the string that ties us to the phenomenal world for Mother's play, and then we are free, and Mother rejoices at our freedom. Otherwise the play will go on indefinitely with all its joys and miseries, fulfilments and frustrations, never to end — all one immense round of mad frolicking seen from the Mother's side, and of immense suffering and bondage seen from ours.

Brushing completely aside your petty individual will, you must joyfully dance Her mad dance. The fun is that when various impulses rise in our mind, we think they rise from ourselves, they are our impulses, they belong to our will! We do not even realize the real nature of our own slavery. When we have got to take part in the great cosmic dance, we should know it is but play and nothing but play, while we are in the depths of our being only witnesses and have no identity with it. Even our so-called individuality is a manifestation of the Cosmic, but we make ourselves miserable by cutting ourselves away from the cosmic Principle, the Mother, who starts and leads the dance.

You see, when you boil potatoes, they too perform a most ludicrous dance inside the pan, and we are just like these potatoes. If they had thoughts, they too would probably imagine that they were dancing out of their own free will, not that they were made to dance. You should try to realize this truth fully. It helps you greatly in advancing along the right line.

Be an instrument in the hands of the Divine

You get a glimpse of freedom only when you are in perfect tune with the cosmic Reality. Otherwise, what we ordinarily call freedom is the animal freedom, freedom *of* the instincts and not *from* the instincts. The working of the senses is the unconscious manifestation of the cosmic Energy. The more we love that kind of freedom the more we live in the unconscious, and the more bound we become. Instead of living an instinctive life, live a conscious life, a life of intelligence. Freedom of the instincts is licence, not freedom at all. The so-called free man is actually a slave of his own moods, his instincts. As the whole world is full of such 'free' people, it is getting worse and worse. Wonderful 'free' souls they are — all puppets dangling most ludicrously on the string of the Divine Mother's delusive power!

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[7] See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 65.

The spiritual aspirant should feel he is an instrument in the hands of the cosmic Power. The best attitude is that of an instrument, knowing oneself to be not the doer, not the agent. Let us take an example: there are different clocks — all driven by the same electric energy. If every clock just thinks that it goes by its own strength, it is a serious error. We are all parts of a mighty stream of energy that is working through us. We should always try to be cosmo-centric and become as impersonal as possible in everything. This body and mind are instruments of a mighty power. To the extent we are able to become cosmo-centric and more and more impersonal, to that extent we succeed in giving up all ideas of agentship and attain peace. The more we run away from the Divine, the more miserable we become.

Really speaking, do you keep your body alive, or is it the divine Energy that is working through you? You are in dynamic contact with the cosmic forces at different levels of your personality — the physical, the mental and the spiritual. Just as the body is maintained by energy derived from food, so is the soul maintained by cosmic spiritual Energy. The moment this Energy is withdrawn, you become lifeless, inert. So never attribute anything to yourself, but learn to attribute everything to the divine Energy. Try instead to become a fit channel for the expression of that Energy. Develop in yourself this capacity by practising humility and self-surrender. But this needs constant effort. Egotism obstructs the free flow of the Energy, cuts us away from the divine Source. That is why we suffer.

Actually we are only instruments in the hands of the Divine. Don't you remember Swami Vivekananda's experience in Kashmir? While in a dilapidated temple which bore the marks of Mohammedan vandalism, he said to himself that he would not have allowed that to happen had he been alive then. Suddenly there came to him the voice of the Divine Mother: 'Am I protecting you, or are you protecting Me?' [8] Swamiji was a realized soul and so he could hear the divine Voice.

Ordinary people should not mistake their own voice for the divine Voice which cannot be so easily heard as people think. Only when our minds are purified and our wills are united with the divine Will can we hear the Voice. Our whole being must vibrate with divine vibrations before we can hear the Voice. And we should note that the Voice does not contradict reason but transcends it. In these days it has become fashionable to hear the 'inner voice', and most of these cases are of a questionable nature.

What is important for us is to strive consciously to connect our little selves with the Divine. As long as we remain awake, let us strive for this to the utmost, and when we go to sleep let us think that the divine Power supports us during that period. We constantly repeat 'I', 'I', 'I'! But then, when this wonderful 'I' sleeps, who protects it? What keeps the body alive then? Our trouble is we think that this little individuality is an independent entity. No, it is not. It is only a part of an infinite Existence.

Just as it is possible for us to react to our little self or ego, so it is possible for us to react to our higher Self. Just as it is possible for us to react to our individuality, so it is possible for us to react to the Principle standing behind it. Just as we can love a human being, so can we love the Principle. This love is very different from our human love, though.

The idea of God as Energy or Power may appeal to you more than the idea of an Impersonal Absolute. But we should learn to appreciate that idea also and get established in it. It will become easy if we regard ourselves as the soul and God as the sum total of all souls, or the Soul of all souls. Sri Ramakrishna used to sing the song:

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[8] Eastern and Western Disciples, *Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974), p. 598

> O Mother all is done after Thine own sweet will;
> Thou art in truth self-willed, Redeemer of mankind!
> Thou workest Thine own work; men only call it theirs.
> . . . .
> Thou art the Moving Force, and I the mere machine;
> The house am I, and Thou the Spirit dwelling there;
> I am the chariot, and Thou the Charioteer:
> I move along as Thou, O Mother, movest me.[9]

It is, however, important to note that the idea implied in the above song refers to a high spiritual state, which one attains only after prolonged struggle and self-effort. Only he who has really passed through strenuous self-effort can give himself up and surrender himself wholly and unconditionally at the feet of the Divine. All forms of spiritual striving make the mind pure and fit for this total self-surrender which can be accomplished only after having gone through one's spiritual practice with great perseverance and doggedness.

Self-surrender can come only when our 'wings' are dead-tired like those of the bird in Sri Ramakrishna's parable. A bird which was sitting on the mast of a ship did not know that the ship was moving. When it suddenly realized that, it started flying towards the east, west, north and south but found only limitless sea everywhere. Finally, when its wings were dead-tired, it came back and sat on the mast allowing itself to be carried by the ship.[10] Only a person who has put forth maximum self-effort can know what true self-surrender is. It is not enough to say simply: 'It is all His will.' Self-surrender is an attitude of mind which one acquires through the consciousness that one's soul is a part of the cosmic Soul and that one's body and mind are instruments of a higher Power. True self-surrender comes only after a direct spiritual experience.

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[9] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., p. 801

[10] ibid., p. 774

Some practical suggestions

Do not make a blueprint of your life. That does not mean you should not prepare a general plan. Plan your future course in a general way, but then leave everything to the Lord. Let Him make you do what He likes.

Let us wish strongly for spiritual progress and spiritual experience. But let us leave the details to the Divine. As we do not always see things clearly, we cannot but think about our future and make plans. But all these are to be ultimately left to the Divine. We should gradually learn to be in tune with the Divine and follow the divine Will. If we sincerely persist in this, we will come to a stage when our whole being will be in tune with the Divine.

Remember this, if one practises complete self-surrender, one cannot take any wrong step. People often glibly say, 'I have left everything to God', and then they go and do as they please. A man who is attached to the objects of the world or to his own desires and prejudices cannot think of self-surrender. We should always note that without a certain minimum of detachment, self-surrender is impossible. For complete self-surrender, complete detachment is necessary.

One who is poor should not wish for more than is necessary. One who is rich should replace the sense of possession with that of trusteeship, and then make the best use of what the Divine gives to one. This is true not only of material possessions, but also of intellectual resources and even spiritual blessings. Whatever you have — musical talent, efficiency in work, intellectual ideas, love — everything must be considered as a gift from God to be passed on to others. You know the story of Job in the 'Old Testament'. He lost everything he had, but only said: 'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord!'[11] We should give to deserving people whatever we can. But we should exercise great care even in making gifts, whatever they may be. Do not give things away indiscriminately in the name of self-surrender. The true devotee gets the right direction at the right time about how, when, and to whom gifts are to be given.

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[11] *Bibie,* Job, 1:21

You need not worry so much about attaining calmness just now. There are two types of calmness: egocentric and cosmo-centric. Some people appear to be calm because of their lack of love or sympathy for others. They are not bothered about other people's sufferings, and appear to be balanced and strong. But they collapse when something happens to themselves. It is better not to have this type of calmness. The cosmo-centric calmness comes as a result of self-surrender to the Divine, by coming in touch with Him. Only when we are established in the universal Consciousness can we attain real calmness and balance under all circumstances.

Do not weaken yourself by being too self-critical. People go on complaining about their life because they allow the causes of their complaints to continue. Unless we make an inner change, unless we overhaul our mind, it will go on giving troubles to us. Do you know Sri Ramakrishna's parable of the pet dog? A dog had been so much fondled in the beginning that it had made a habit of jumping on to its master's body. Later on, the master wanted to control this, but the dog would not obey. Even when it was beaten it tried to jump on to the master's body.[12] Our mind is like that dog. It has been pampered so long that it is difficult to control it and surrender it at the feet of the Lord. But through repeated practice we have got to make the mind surrender itself to God.

First of all bring about a transformation in your own life, at least to some extent, through regular *sādhanā*, and then take up the ideal of 'work and worship'. Only you should see that you do not take up more work than you can joyfully do. In the beginning it is not possible to maintain constant remembrance of the Lord. So, offer all that you do to Him at the beginning and at the end of the work and, if possible, while you are engaged in work.

Work becomes mechanical only when you forget the goal of your life, when you forget that whatever you do is a means to realizing God. It is no use working like a machine. The trouble with our work is not so much with the quantity of work as with its quality, that is, the way we do it. It is our inability to do our work in a spirit of dedication to God that is the main obstacle to doing work as a spiritual discipline. And there can never be any dedication unless the goal of God-realization is constantly kept in view.

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[12] *Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 237

Obedience to superiors is a test of our surrender to God. But the person who says that in obeying his superiors he has to sacrifice everything including his spiritual aspiration and practice, has not understood the spirit of surrender. As we practise self-surrender to God, our ego is not so much destroyed as transmuted. The individual consciousness expands and finds a place for everybody within it — superiors, juniors and equals. True self-surrender endows a person with a higher wisdom and dignity that prevents other people from taking advantage of him.

Self-surrender does not mean you have to behave like fools. Once upon a time there was a great scholar. His wife one day had to go somewhere, and she asked him to boil lentils on the stove before she returned. Now, as the cooking proceeded, the lentils started frothing up and the soup started spilling out of the vessel. The scholar immediately began to pray to God. His wife later on came, saw the mess the man had created, and asked him what he had done. She then scolded him: 'You fool, could you not pour a little oil on the lentils?' When we pray to God we should pray for the wisdom to distinguish truth from falsehood, the good from the bad, the right from the wrong. Let us work as best we can with the understanding which He has already given us, and as we proceed He will fill us more and more.

It is a great bondage to depend too much on outside help and seek advice from others too often. The more you turn to the inner Guide the more free you become. Have infinite trust in the Divine and go on with the duties of your life heroically. Let the hands be busy with work and the mind occupied with thoughts of the Divine. If you have to do intellectual work and keep your mind engaged in worldly thoughts, then fix your heart, the will, on the Lord firmly. Surrender your ego to the Divine.

Work and worship must go hand in hand. Our ideal is to transmute work also into worship, but it can be realized only through constant practice in the course of time. In order to succeed in this, you have to maintain something of the prayerful and meditative mood while doing your work. It does not matter if you do not succeed always. Let these failures be stepping stones to success. With a part of the mind we have to think of the Lord while with the other part we have to attend to the duties of life, noticing of course what we are doing, and offering the fruits of the work to the Divine. All this is no doubt difficult. But let us try again and again.

Don't you know Sri Ramakrishna's parable of the woman who prepares flattened rice? With one hand she has to turn the grain in the machine, with the other she has to nurse her baby, all the while talking to friends and bargaining with customers.[13] Something of that dexterity must be brought into our spiritual striving.

You know the well-known song of Śaṁkara wherein he says: 'Whatever I do, O Lord, is Thy worship.' [14] This attitude is easy when you love work. If you really dislike the work you have got to do because of some intrinsic defect in it, then please tell the Lord about your difficulties and about the fact that you are doing it only because of the pressure of circumstances. If you so wish, you may request Him to take it away from you and give something better. He will surely fulfil your wish if it is for your own good. Otherwise, you should know that it is good for you to continue with the old work in which case you may find unexpected benefits from the very work which you disliked.

I am not quite sure if Sri Ramakrishna gives us blows. Our troubles and tribulations are the results of the working out of our *karma*. So, instead of blaming the Lord, let us profit by our experiences, however bitter they are, get dispassion more and more, and hold on to the Lord always. He is not only witnessing our trials but also is ready to help us out of them. The Lord has brought you into close contact with His spiritual current. Follow that current and maintain the contact. In due course you will feel the divine Presence always within you, whether you sit quiet or work hard.

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[13] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., p. 314-15, 380-81

[14] यद्यत्कर्म करोमि तत्तदखिलं शंभो तवाराधनम्।
Śivamānasapūjā, 4

Work and worship must go hand in hand. And work done in the right spirit is acceptable to the Divine as much as devoted worship consisting of prayer, meditation, etc. My teacher Swami Brahmananda gave me this instruction: 'Before you begin to work remember the Lord and offer salutation to Him. Do the same at intervals in the course of the work, and also after you finish it.'

Divine Grace may not necessarily remove all our physical miseries and sorrows, but if we have the grace we will be able to pass through the fiery ordeal of life successfully, burning the dross in us and attaining inner purity, and also develop greater resignation to the divine Will. Blessed are our sufferings, then, if they bring us clearer knowledge and steadier devotion.

Take the divine Name, think of the indwelling Spirit, feel the holy Presence, surrendering your will to His, and be at peace. Pray to the Lord for bringing new light and strength to your mind and heart.

What else can you do but take things as they are and try to do your best? Whether you know it or not, your past, present and future rest with the Lord. The best course for us is to play our part as well as we can and surrender ourselves to Him as much as possible.

Everyone has to pass through periods of great uncertainty. Whenever you feel anxious for some reason or other, repeat the Name of the Lord, think of Him and practise self-surrender. I am sure this method will bring you great strength and peace in due course.

It is only a joy to serve the Lord's cause. I am not worried about the future since I know that the past, the present and the future rest in Him. The best thing we can do is to remember Him and surrender ourselves to Him and be absorbed in His infinite Presence, Love and Bliss.

Offer all the fruits of your labour to Him who dwells in your heart and guides your destiny, and be at peace. Even if you think that the whole world has forsaken you, know it for certain that the Lord is there with you and within you. So, pray to the Divine Lord to come to your aid and enlighten your path. In the midst of the loneliness of your life, go on praying to Him for light and guidance and try to feel His divine Presence even in the midst of trials and difficulties. The Lord will grant you all the strength and courage you need.

If you wish to have peace of mind, do not expect anything from anyone. If you get something, be thankful; if not, thank God. And know in your heart of hearts that the Lord alone is your own; as the Soul of your soul, He cannot leave you, nor you, Him.

Success in an undertaking does not just depend on our endeavour alone; there are also other factors which combine to make success possible. However, even when our efforts end in an objective failure, there will be a subjective success if we have worked hard in the proper spirit. Having His eye on this inner success, Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa has said: 'To work alone you have the right but not to the fruits thereof. . . .' [15]

The great task in spiritual life, as in all other walks of life, is to know where we stand in relation to the Reality and face the problems boldly. Along with that, we must try to improve ourselves. If we can bring about a change for the better in the environment, well and good; otherwise we have to play our parts as best we can in the restricted situation in which we are placed.

It is sheer cowardice to try to run away from life and think of taking shelter in death. It is like falling from the frying pan into the fire and no sane person should think of it.

The great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna have taught us that the spiritual seeker should not be just an automaton, always eager to be guided by someone else. We must learn to acquire conscious control over our personality, and through service, prayer and self-surrender, try to be in tune with the divine Will and follow its biddings with devotion and steadfastness.

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[15] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 2.47

I have known there is such a thing as the divine Will which works through the human will for one's own good and that of others. Through prayer, *japa*, meditation and *pūjā*, we have to contact that.

Strive to your utmost by following your higher moral sense, by fulfilling your duties in a spirit of detachment and worship, and by doing your spiritual practice with regularity and devotion. All those who have come under the influence of the divine Power, manifest in this age in Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother, are fortunate. As you unfurl your sail, you will catch more and more of the breeze of divine Grace that is constantly blowing.

You know the analogy of the salt doll which wanted to fathom the depth of the ocean and got dissolved. It happens only in the case of the doll of pure salt, but not of the doll of sand or of the doll made of plenty of salt and sand. In all of us both 'salt' and 'sand' are there. In order to practise absolute self-surrender, the 'sand' is to be eliminated or transformed into 'salt'. Our ego, with its pride and innumerable desires, cannot be transmuted easily, but attempts are to be made little by little so that eventually the 'sand' is removed. Until then, we have to be like the baby monkey clinging to its mother, and follow the instruction of Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa: '*mām anusmara yudhya ca* — remember Me and fight the battle of life.'

When the 'salt' nature asserts itself, a great surge of love overpowers us and self-surrender becomes easy for the time being. But then, may be immediately afterwards, the 'sand' nature which is predominant becomes strong and complete self-surrender becomes an impossibility. At that time we should not worry, but should try to remain calm.

Along with our egocentric activity, we should try to surrender as much as we can to the divine Will. In each one of us double, sometimes triple, personalities exist, and these create no end of conflicts. One nature wages war against another and makes the confusion worse confounded.

Instead of allowing ourselves to be completely upset, we have to practise *japa, dhyāna*, remembering the Lord even when we are actively engaged in our duties, and offering the fruits of all our labours to Him.

The practice of self-surrender passes through three stages:

1. Whether it is spiritual practice or performance of duties, at first we do them in an egocentric way.
2. Next we learn to offer the fruits of our work to the divine Spirit.
3. In the last stage we perform everything for pleasing the Lord. As our mind becomes purer, we feel the divine Presence, and it is only then that we feel the Lord is like the operator and we are like machines.

PART II

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

(ii) Techniques

CHAPTER 18

THE PATH OF YOGA-VEDĀNTA SYNTHESIS

Before I begin, I would like to refer to some passages from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* relevant to our theme.

> Master: You were talking of worshipping the clay image. Even if the image *is* of clay, there is need for that sort of worship. God himself has provided different forms of worship. He who is the Lord of the universe has arranged all these forms to suit different men in different stages of knowledge. . . .
>
> M (humbly): How, Sir, may we fix our minds on God?
>
> Master: Repeat God's name and sing His glories, and keep holy company; and now and then visit God's devotees and holy men. The mind cannot dwell on God if it is immersed day and night in worldliness, in worldly duties and responsibilities; it is most necessary to go into solitude now and then and think of God. To fix the mind on God is very difficult in the beginning unless one practises meditation in solitude. When a tree is young it should be fenced all around; otherwise it may be destroyed by cattle.
>
> To meditate, you should withdraw within yourself or retire to a secluded corner or to the forest. And you should always discriminate between the Real and the unreal. God alone is Real, the eternal Substance; all else is unreal, that is, impermanent. By discriminating thus, one should shake off impermanent objects from the mind.
>
> M (humbly): How ought we to live in the world?
>
> Master: Do all your duties, but keep your mind on God. Live with all — with wife and children, father and mother — and serve them. Treat them as if they were very dear to you, but know in your heart of hearts that they do not belong to you. . . .
>
> M: Is it possible to *see* God?

> Master: Yes, certainly. Living in solitude now and then, repeating God's name and singing His glories, and discriminating between the Real and the unreal — these are the means to employ to see him.[1]

In the above passage Sri Ramakrishna has given the essentials of the path of synthesis — synthesis of Yoga and Vedānta, of devotion and knowledge and of work and worship. This is the path best suited to the modern age. Worship, prayer, meditation, discrimination, service — all have a place in this path. The path of self-analysis called Jñāna-yoga can be practised successfully only by a select few. For all the rest the synthetic method is the easiest. It was this integral path that we learned at the feet of the great direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna.

Need for preliminary discipline

The great ones first of all taught us the prime importance of moral life which should go hand in hand with spiritual discipline. As in our worldly affairs, so also in the world of the Spirit there must be systematic practice. We must be able to prepare ourselves so that we may in the proper mood follow the spiritual path. Sri Ramakrishna had a great disciple, Saint Durgacharan Nag — Nag Mahashaya as he used to be called. His father was very much attached to him, but the old man used to do a lot of *japa*. Once when he was told, 'Your father is a great devotee', Nag Mahashaya replied, 'What can he achieve? He is much attached to me. An anchored boat does not move.' There is a story behind this saying. One moonlit night, some drunken men took it into their heads to go on a boat ride. They went to the ghat, hired a boat, sat at the oars and started rowing. They rowed and rowed the whole night. Early in the morning, when the effect of drink had gone, they found to their surprise that they had not moved an inch. 'What is the matter? What is the matter?', they asked one another. They had forgotten to raise the anchor!

I hear constant complaints from people: 'We are doing our spiritual practice, but we do not make any progress.' The reply is here: At the time of your spiritual practice are you able, at least to some extent, to free your mind from worldly matters and give your purified mind to God? That is the point. We need training in all paths. Some of you might have read Swami Vivekananda's books, *Jñāna-yoga, Karma-yoga, Bhakti-yoga* and *Rāja-yoga.* Whatever path one may follow, one needs discipline, proper training of the mind, and creation of the proper mood. If the mind is trained and the mood is created, one can carry on one's spiritual practice with great success. Our trouble is, in worldly matters we may be methodical, but in spiritual affairs we are sloppy and impulsive like children. I have seen grown-up people and big officials often talking like children. First of all, a mature inner personality is to be built up. Many of us are persons but have no personality. We are individuals, but have no individuality. Through moral practice, through the discharging of duties, through regular worship, a spiritualized personality is to be built up. It is only then that our spiritual practice becomes fruitful. Our *japa* and meditation will then prove to be a source of great blessing.

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[1] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda, (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), pp. 5-7

I repeat, in all the paths, in all the Yogas, a strict discipline is necessary. If I follow Karma-yoga, my mind must be completely calm. I must try to be detached from the things of the world and from the fruits of *karma.* If I follow Bhakti-yoga, I must have the attitude of total self-surrender to the Divine. Further, there must be great yearning for God, a spiritual hunger that cannot be appeased by anything of the world. Through prayer, through *japa*, through meditation, and ultimately through divine contact, the spiritual seeker appeases this spiritual hunger and finds supreme peace and bliss in divine realization. Many want to follow Jñāna-yoga, but the mind is to be trained so that it can follow the path of extreme self-analysis — 'I am not the body; I am not the mind; I am not the ego or the senses; I am the Spirit.' For this the teachers of Jñāna-yoga insist on certain preliminary qualifications. The aspirant must have perfect dispassion for enjoyment in this and future lives, and must have the capacity to discriminate between the Permanent and the impermanent. Further, he must have great self-control, *śraddhā* (faith) in the supreme Spirit, forbearance, and must be able to practise concentration. Finally, he must have intense longing for liberation.

Many people say, 'Oh! I am not able to practise concentration.' Knowing the persons, that their minds are not pure enough, I say to them, 'It is good that you don't have concentration.' If an impure mind gets concentrated, it becomes like a bombshell. Aren't we concentrated when we are angry, when we are full of hatred and jealousy? That concentration is no good. It is actually dangerous. So an amount of preliminary spiritual discipline is necessary. The path of Yoga according to Patañjali consists of eight steps or disciplines. You have to practise these disciplines systematically. One cannot get established in spiritual life all of a sudden.

Have yearning for God

In *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, the Master again and again says, 'You must have spiritual yearning.' [2] Spiritual yearning is like hunger. When people ask me, 'Why should I meditate?', I say in return, 'Why should you? Don't do it.' If you had the yearning in you, you would not have asked that foolish question. When you come to have that true spiritual hunger you cannot but think of God, you cannot but pray to Him, you cannot but take His Name and think of His glory. This hunger is to be awakened. This hunger is to be maintained. That becomes possible if you do your spiritual practice regularly. You feed the body with material food; you feed the mind through study, with ideas. But you actually starve the soul in the midst of plenty. Do you not feel starved? The soul yearns for the infinite Spirit; it yearns to realize the infinite Presence, divine Love and Bliss, and we do not satisfy this yearning. But when we attempt to do that, a new life starts for us.

The Master has also said that holy company is necessary[3], the company of those who are following the spiritual path, who help in strengthening us in the spiritual path, who reflect something of the divine glory and teach us by their own personal example. Above all, in their company we develop yearning for God.

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[2] ibid., p. 7 and *passim*

[3] ibid., p. 21, and *passim*

Here you come across a big problem. It is the impure mind that runs after the things of the world. The pure mind naturally reflects the glory of God, moves towards Him, meditates on Him, tries to feel His divine Presence, Love and Bliss. How to purify the mind? First of all, you must avoid evil thoughts, evil feelings, evil actions, as much as you can. Entertain good thoughts, good feelings and perform good actions. That is the first step. We should always bear in mind that we are souls, the Ātman. This Ātman has put on a human personality with a view to playing a part in the cosmic drama of life. Whatever be the part that is assigned to us, that part has to be played well. That means, we have to perform the duties of life and work in a spirit of detachment, as a form of service to God. But mere moral practice and fulfilment of duties are not enough to purify the mind. We have to meditate on Him, pray to Him who is the infinite Source of purity, knowledge, devotion, compassion, love and bliss.

The graded path

We must follow the right path. Suppose I get lost in the wilderness. If I follow the wrong path, what happens? I enter the wilderness more and more. If I follow the right path, I come out of it. I am reminded of a story. A motorist was driving at break-neck speed. He wanted to reach a certain place. He asked a school boy who had studied a little geography: 'My son, if I go this way, shall I be able to reach the place?' 'Yes Sir,' said the boy, 'you will reach it.' 'How far is it this way?' asked the motorist. 'Sir, you will have to go 25,000 miles', replied the boy. 'If I go the other way?' 'Then only two miles', was the answer. Do you follow the idea? By the first path, you have to go round the world to reach the place. If you go the other way, just two miles. So also in spiritual life, through the cultivation of the proper mood, proper attitude, and by following proper directions you reach the goal soon, progress quicker. A tremendous change takes place within you. But don't try to quicken your steps too much. Go slow, but with determination, along the right path. Gradually you will reach the highest Truth.

In our spiritual practice we must proceed step by step. First comes *pratimā pūjā*, i.e. worshipping the Lord with the help of a form, a symbol, a picture or an idol. Next, the repetition of the Lord's Name, thinking of Him and singing His glory. Later on, the mind gets a little absorbed; you feel the divine Presence. That is *dhyāna,* and *dhyāna* in due course leads to the highest superconscious realization. In a parable of Sri Ramakrishna, a poor wood-cutter is instructed to go forward step by step; from the sandalwood forest to the silver mine, from there to the gold mine, and finally to the diamond mine.[4] Similarly, if we sincerely follow the spiritual path and begin from the beginning, we will reach the Truth. But if we begin from the end, we will reach nowhere. Some people want to practise Advaita *sādhanā* (spiritual discipline). I tell them, 'I know nothing about Advaita *sādhanā;* go to some other teacher. But if you want to begin from the beginning, I can tell you something of it.'

First of all, begin with the form aspect of the Divine. I have *dehātmabuddhi,* body consciousness. I feel I am an embodied being, I am a person amongst persons. How can I think of the infinite Spirit? I can't. So let me begin with that body consciousness and try to see what lies ahead. Hanumān was asked by Śrī Rāma, 'How do you think of Me?' Hanumān said:

> O Lord, while I identify myself with my body, I am Thy servant. When I consider myself an individual soul, I am Thy part. And when I look upon myself as the Spirit, I am one with Thee — this is my firm conviction.[5]

So let us begin from the beginning.

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[4] ibid., pp. 35, 407

[5] देहबुद्धया तु दासोऽस्मि जीवबुद्धया त्वदंशकः ।
आत्मबुद्धया त्वमेवाहमिति मे निश्चिता मतिः ॥
The source of this popular verse is not definitely known. See Swami Yatiswarananda, *Universal Prayers* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1955), pp. 238-9. Also see *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. pp. 32, 534

Is a Guru essential?

This is the question many people ask. They don't ask this question when they send their children to schools and colleges or to a music academy. The doubt about the need for a *guru* comes only when they start thinking about their spiritual life. As I said, many people are mere children when it comes to spiritual life. Age and physical growth alone are not enough. If there be some unique souls, born with divine Consciousness, who feel the divine Presence even from their very childhood, they do not need a spiritual teacher; but all others do need one. Once a devotee asked my teacher Swami Brahmananda: 'Maharaj, is a *guru* necessary?' The Swami smiled and said: 'My boy, one requires a teacher even when one wants to learn stealing. And this sublime *Brahmavidyā* — the Knowledge of Brahman — does it not require a teacher to acquire it?' [6] You know even pick-pockets have their *gurus* because they have to pass through a tremendous discipline and training, and this needs the guidance of a master pick-pocket.

In this connection, I wish to tell you an anecdote. Girish Chandra Ghosh, the famous writer and actor of Bengal, and a great devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, used to practise homeopathy in his old age. Taking the name of the Master he would give medicine. His tremendous intuition enabled him to achieve success in his way of treatment. One day an elderly and very decent-looking gentleman was sitting by his side, when a young man came and said, 'Sir, I have lost my wrist-watch on my way.' The other gentleman became inquisitive and asked: 'When and where did you lose it?' The young man said, 'Sir, I lost it at such and such an hour, at such and such a place', and the elderly man said, 'You will get it back.' How could he give that assurance? Because the fine-looking gentleman was one of the leaders of pick-pockets, one of their *gurus*!

Let me give you another instance. You want to learn astronomy; you take a book and try to understand it; you get precious nothing! But the astronomer says something astounding. Every day you see the sun rising and setting and here comes a man who says that the sun never rises, the sun never sets; it is all due to the movement of the earth. If we believe in our sense-perception alone, we cannot grasp all this. But if we do not, we have to go to him, study under him, make experiments, and only then can we really convince ourselves that what we see with our eyes is an illusion and what the astronomer says is the truth.

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[6] *Spiritual Talks* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1968), p. 43

A spiritual teacher also comes and says something astounding. We are all conscious of our body; we think we are all men and women. But the spiritual teacher says that we are the Spirit, distinct not only from the body but also from the mind and the ego. But if you think, as many people do think, 'Oh, he is a cheat', then Lord bless you! Instead of doubting your *guru* you should doubt yourself. 'Am I this mass of flesh, this mass of filth? Or is there something living in me, something conscious, a soul, in me?' When you start thinking like that, your spiritual life begins. I go to a teacher who has been following the spiritual path all his life, has attained illumination, has come to possess great sympathy, love, compassion and kindness. I sit at his feet, learn from him something of spiritual disciplines and do my spiritual practices regularly. As my mind becomes purer and purer, I get something in the domain of the Spirit and my *Iṣṭa Devatā* becomes living for me. I feel within me a Presence that permeates my being, which is also manifest in all beings.

In the seventh chapter of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* we come across a dialogue between two sages, Nārada and Sanatkumāra. Saints and sages do not drop from the sky. They too are born as men. Saints are not born perfect — they have to manifest their perfection. Through *sādhanā* they unfold their divine potentiality. Nārada had had his period of true studentship, had studied all branches of learning, the scriptures, the sciences and the arts. But having mastered these subjects, he found something was lacking in him. He discovered that he knew nothing about himself, his real nature. We are all quite content to read and know of the outer world but neglect to know even a bit of ourselves. It is most unscientific. Eddington, the British astro-physicist has said, 'That to which Truth matters must have a place in reality.' Without some knowledge about the subject, education is incomplete. The world is full of half-educated people who don't know themselves, who don't know anything of the higher Reality, but pose to be teachers or saviours of the world. Such persons are out to destroy the world. Now, let us come back to the Upaniṣadic anecdote. Sanatkumāra asked Nārada to tell him about what he already knew. Nārada gave a long list of subjects he had studied including grammar, rituals, the Vedas, etc. And then he added: 'I am only a knower of verbal texts, not a knower of the Ātman. I have heard that one who knows the Ātman goes beyond grief. But I have not realized the Ātman, so I am in great sorrow.' [7] Sanatkumāra listened to him with infinite tenderness. He began to teach Nārada about Brahman. First he said that speech was Brahman, i.e. an aspect of the manifestation of Brahman. Higher than speech was mind, higher than mind was will, higher than that was mind-stuff, still higher were meditation, intuition, the five elements, Prāṇa and so on; the highest was Bliss. After thus guiding the understanding of the disciple step by step, Sanatkumāra made a remarkable statement: 'That alone which is infinite is Bliss. There is no bliss in the finite.' [8]

How to purify our minds?

The trouble is that our soul longs for infinite joy, infinite love, infinite bliss. But we try to find that in the finite, and, if we don't succeed, we feel frustrated. The *guru* said, 'If you want real joy, unbounded joy, you have to reach the Infinite.' So Nārada's next question was: 'What is meant by the term "the Infinite"?' 'It is that all-pervading Reality which is everywhere — above, below, to the right and to the left. Attaining to that, you don't see or hear or know anything else. It is infinite Consciousness.' [9] But how to get to it? What prevents us from attaining to the Infinite forthwith? Here the great ancient teacher Sanatkumāra gives us in a nutshell the whole gist of spiritual discipline:

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[7] *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 7.1.3

[8] यो वै भूमा तत्सुखं नाल्पे सुखमस्ति ।
· *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 7.23.1

[9] ibid., 7.24.1, 7.25.1

> When *āhāra* (the food we take) is pure, our mind becomes pure, and when the mind becomes pure, our memory becomes steady, that is, we remember our spiritual nature and gradually become established in spiritual consciousness. This destroys the knots of the heart and leads to emancipation.[10]

When we have realized the infinite Spirit we are freed from all bondage and sorrow. When we realize that we are one with the infinite Spirit, all our problems of life and death are solved.

Let us now try to understand the meaning of the word *āhāra*. The word *āhāra* means what we take in. Does it mean only food? Pure Sāttvic food? Pure vegetarian food? How far does this help? It helps a little; but unless you know how to purify the mind, nothing much happens. There are plenty of wicked people who are vegetarians. What type of vegetarians are they? Lord bless them! If you feed a poisonous snake with pure milk, it will only manufacture poison. So it is not enough to fill our bellies with pure food; our poisonous nature is to be discarded. Therefore Śaṁkara observes while commenting on the above passage:

> *Āhāra* is that which is taken in, viz. the experience of sound etc. which are taken in for the experience of the agent; and when this cognition of objects is purified, i.e. when the cognition of objects becomes free from all taint of aversion, attachment or delusion — then of one having such cognition, the inner nature becomes pure.[11]

Some of you might have seen the 'three Japanese monkeys'. These are three monkey dolls. One monkey is closing both the ears, another, both the eyes and the third, the mouth. During my stay in Europe I came across a stone carving on the bank of a lake in Switzerland. There were also the three monkeys, but with this difference: one had only one eye closed, another had only one ear closed and third had half the mouth closed. I was taken aback for a moment. Then in a flash, I understood the meaning. 'Don't see what is bad but see what is good. Don't hear what is bad but hear what is good. Don't speak what is bad but speak what is good.' First I thought it was an original idea. Then my mind turned to the famous Vedic prayer:

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[10] आहारशुद्धौ सत्वशुद्धिः सत्वशुद्धौ ध्रुवा स्मृतिः
स्मृतिलम्भे सर्वग्रन्थीनां विप्रमोक्षः ।
ibid., 7.26.2

[11] *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* translated into English by Dr. Ganganath Jha, (Madras: V.C. Seshachari, 1923), Vol. IV, p. 219

> O gods, may we hear with our ears what is auspicious. O ye adorable ones, may we see with our eyes what is auspicious. May we sing praises to ye and may we enjoy with strong limbs and body the life allotted us by the gods.[12]

Now, we have to practise all this. And when you have done that for some time, your mind becomes pure to some extent. Make the best use of your vocal organ. You make bad use of it by talking rubbish. Don't do it. Take the name of the Lord — any name that appeals to you. Meditate on any aspect of the Lord that appeals to you, with an amount of devotion. After some time, you will find that your mind is becoming pure. Repetition of the divine Name and visualization of the divine Form uplift you. Later on, you may get a glimpse of your *Iṣṭa Devatā*, and a glimpse of even the universal Spirit.

The eight steps of Yoga

How to begin? Patañjali, the great teacher of Yoga, has placed before us a spiritual ladder with eight steps that takes us to perfection.[13] The first step called *yama* means the observance of the five virtues: *ahimsā* (non-violence), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacarya* (continence), and *aparigraha* (non-dependence on others' charity). Then comes *niyama* or the five rules of conduct. First of these is *śauca*, purity of body and mind. Then *santoṣa*, contentment, has to be developed. If one is always grumbling and complaining, how can one with such a mind ever do anything successful either in this world or in the world of the Spirit? We must adjust ourselves to the things in this world and try to improve ourselves. The third rule is *tapas*. There should be an amount of austerity in life. Without rigour in spiritual practice, each generation is becoming softer than the previous one. Nothing can be achieved by these soft people. The fourth rule is *svādhyāya*, self-study. We study books, but how much of it enters our mind? We hear a lecture and say it was wonderful; but if asked, 'What did you hear?', we would not be able to repeat anything. The words, as it were, enter through one ear and pass out through the other. Ideas are not retained. *Svādhyāya* means reflecting on what you study and making it a part of your own. The Upaniṣad tells you: *śrotavyaḥ*; first you hear or read. Then *mantavyaḥ*, you have to reflect on what you have heard or read.[14] That is the way. Only when we are to some extent established in the moral path, do we begin to get benefit out of spiritual disciplines. The fifth rule is *Īśvara-praṇidhāna* or self-surrender to God. Surrender your all — body, mind and soul — to Him.

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[12] भद्रं कर्णेभिः श्रुणुयाम देवाः भद्रं पश्येमाक्षभिर्यजत्राः ।
स्थिरैरङ्गैस्तुष्टुवांसस्तनूभिर्व्यशेम देवहितं यदायुः ॥
Ṛg-Veda, 1.89.8

[13] यम-नियमासन-प्राणायाम-प्रत्याहार-
धारणा-ध्यान-समाधयोऽष्टावङ्गानि ॥
Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra*, 2.29

The third step of the spiritual ladder according to Patañjali is *āsana*. You may sit like a statue for many hours; what do you get? Pretty nothing. At least there should be spiritual aspiration; then your sitting posture helps you in your spiritual practice.

The fourth step or discipline is *prāṇāyāma*. In the practice of *prāṇāyāma* you stop your breath. What do you gain? If it is merely a physical phenomenon, then a football bladder must be a great *yogī*! What do you get by retention of breath? Nothing by itself. But when the mind is greatly disciplined, when the mind is in a spiritual mood, *prāṇāyāma* helps one to rise to a higher plane of consciousness.

The fifth step called *pratyāhāra* is detachment. From everything the mind is to be detached. When you are attending to some work, you banish all other thoughts and give your mind to that particular work. If you fail to practise detachment you invite worries. When you go to sleep, and think of too many things, you don't get sleep, you suffer from insomnia and fall ill. Similarly, if you wish to meditate, you should detach your mind, as much as you can, from the things of the world — even from the pictures, the thoughts and feelings that arise within you. But detachment should not create a vacuum in your mind. A vacant mind will fall asleep. For many people meditation is an invitation to sleep! Be wide awake. Use your will power a little more. Take the name of the Lord while you meditate; then there would not be any fear of falling asleep. Instead, the mind will rise to a higher plane.

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[14] *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad,* 2.4.5 and 4.5.6

We now come to the sixth step or discipline, *dhāraṇā*. This means fixing your mind for some time on some divine theme or on a holy Word or on a holy, blissful Form — in a particular centre of consciousness. You have to feel your centre of consciousness first and then concentrate your mind there.

Dhyāna, maintaining a continuous flow of a single thought about the Divine, is the seventh step. Concentration here is deeper and lasts longer. You remain absorbed in divine Consciousness, and that leads to the highest state, *samādhi* or the superconscious state. *Dhyāna* is mystic worship, an attempt to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Before we proceed further, let us ask ourselves an important question. We identify ourselves with the body and think that we are men and women; we worship a certain Deity — male or female. We begin our spiritual life that way, and also end in that way; but what do we gain? At the very beginning of our spiritual life it is essential on our part to be conscious of what we are doing. In what way is worship connected to our life?

Worship of God

What do we mean by worship of God? What is our conception of God? In Europe a devotee said to me, 'Swami, please never utter the word *God*. It calls up our childhood image of someone beyond the clouds, in the heaven, ever eager to punish those who break His laws. I cannot think of that.' I said, 'All right, use the word Īśvara. I use the word Brahman.'

If we worship God we must feel our nearness to Him. We usually think of Him as the Creator, Protector and Destroyer. He takes things back to Himself, which we call destroying. But we should remember that He is much more than all that: He is the Soul of our souls, nearer than the nearest, dearer than the dearest. But in order to realize this truth we should first of all know that we are souls. We should know that we are the Ātman different from the mind, the ego, the senses and the body. Without knowing that we are souls, parts of an infinite Spirit, we cannot know God who is the Soul of all souls, the supreme Spirit.

He comes to us as father and mother. He comes to us as the *guru*, and He comes to us also as our *Iṣṭa Devatā* — the Deity chosen for worship. According to dualistic Vedānta — and most of us should start as dualists — the soul and the Oversoul, the Ātman and the Paramātman, are ever distinct but ever connected. We should begin with the knowledge of the soul's eternal relationship with the eternal God. They are ever in union; yet owing to the impurity of our mind, we become attached to the Lord's creation but not to Him. A great western psychologist, seeing the ways of ordinary religious people, once remarked, 'People do not want God. They only want to use God!' They want to pray to God so that He may fulfil all their desires, and if He does not grant their prayers, some become sceptical and say: 'Oh, God does not exist, and even if He exists He is deaf, He is blind, He does not respond.' That kind of childish conception is no good. You want only the good God who always showers on you all that you ask for, as if He has no other task but to grant you boons.

Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna worshipped the supreme Spirit first in the form of Kālī, a representation of the cosmic Power. The image of Kālī is symbolic but highly suggestive. With one hand She is creating; with another hand She is protecting; with the third hand She is destroying; and with the fourth, She is holding a decapitated head. This is only a concrete representation of what the Upaniṣads speak of the nature of Brahman. A son asked his father, 'Master, tell me about Brahman.' And the father replied: 'Realize That out of which all things come into being, by which all things live and unto which all things go back; that is Brahman.'[15] In our *bhakti* scriptures we call Brahman by various names like Kālī or Nārāyaṇa or Śiva. In Vedānta we call it Īśvara or *Sat-Cit-Ānanda*, Infinite Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. He dwells in our souls as the Soul of our souls. Again, we all dwell in Him. We must feel it, at least His nearness. If we cannot feel His nearness, we should try to develop the consciousness that He is nearer than the nearest, dearer than the dearest.

As I have already said, for all this we need to have a correct conception of God. But God is too vast for our conception. I give an illustration: We are like small bubbles. The ocean is too big even for our conception. So what should we do? We find some mighty waves; let us move towards them, attach ourselves to them and through them in course of time we get an idea of the ocean itself. Similarly we start our spiritual journey with one such mountain-like wave: Our *Iṣṭa Devatā*. We worship Him, pray to Him, and through all this we come to have a higher consciousness and a broader conception of Reality. The *Iṣṭa Devatā* tells us: 'Look here. I may be a mighty wave, you may be a small bubble. But all of us have got the infinite ocean behind us.' When the proper time comes, He reveals to us the highest Truth. He reveals that He is none other than the infinite Spirit.

Japa and meditation

We cannot realize the infinite Spirit all at once. We must begin from where we are and follow a path that will ultimately enable us to reach That. Spiritual life is like mountain climbing. You have to proceed higher and higher slowly and carefully. Swami Brahmananda says:

> Take the illustration of a man standing in the courtyard of a

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[15] यतो वा इमानि भूतानि जायन्ते। येन जातानि जीवन्ति।
यत्प्रयन्त्यभिसंविशन्ति। तद् विजिज्ञासस्व। तद् ब्रह्मेति।
Taittirīya Upaniṣad, 3.1.1

> house. He wants to reach the roof, but instead of climbing the staircase step by step, he permits himself to be thrown up bodily. What happens? He is seriously hurt. So it is with spiritual life.[16]

Don't expect to become a realized soul overnight. Begin with simpler things. *Japa* — repetition of the divine Name — is a most efficacious first step. But *japa* is not to be done parrot-like. Patañjali says: *Tajjapastadartha-bhāvanam.*[17] As you repeat the divine Name, do the *arthabhāvanā*. What is *arthabhāvanā*? Dwelling on the meaning. What is the meaning of the *mantra*? You find that as you progress in spiritual life, you understand the deeper and deeper 'meaning' of the *mantra*. First of all, let us think of the luminous, blissful Form of the *Iṣṭa Devatā*. Then think of Him as an embodiment of infinite purity, knowledge, devotion, compassion, love and bliss. Then think that He is no other than the Paramātman — the all-pervading Spirit dwelling in all beings.

We talk of *dhyāna* or meditation. You say 'I am meditating.' What are you meditating on? Going on brooding over something or other? That is not what is implied by that word. *Dhyāna* is the continuous flow of thought towards a higher spiritual Ideal in a higher spiritual centre of consciousness. When you think of the Lord, you become absorbed in the divine thought. But this absorption will not come all of a sudden. *Japa* is a step towards that. Repeat the divine Name, thinking of Him; then the mind becomes a little calm, and even the sound drops off. As you thus go on thinking of Him, the *Iṣṭa Devatā* becomes more and more real than the things of the world. Naturally the mind gets absorbed in Him, and you gradually get a taste of the divine Presence, Love and Bliss. God may come to us as the *Iṣṭa Devatā*; as the supreme Spirit, as *Sat-Cit-Ānanda*, i.e. Infinite Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. All this will happen if we undergo regular spiritual practice.

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[16] Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1971), p. 245

[17] Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra,* 1.28

In the beginning it is good to have the support of a picture of your *Iṣṭa Devatā*. Gaze at the picture; concentrate on the picture. But it is much better to install the picture, the holy Form, in your inner world. Then you do not have to depend on anything outside. Whenever you want, you can look within where your *Iṣṭa Devatā* is seated, and pray to Him. Repeat His Name; meditate on Him — first, it may be on His form, then on His attributes, next on His infinite *svarūpa* or nature. That is how one is to progress in meditation.

We are asked to meditate on the 'lotus of the heart'. Where is this heart? Is it the physiological heart? We cannot do anything there. What is meant is the centre of our inner consciousness that is felt in the region of the heart. It is the consciousness of our soul that permeates our body and mind. It is the consciousness of the Ātman which is non-different from the consciousness of the Paramātman. It may be compared to space as it is contentless; hence it is called *cidākāśa*. We have to meditate in this *cidākāśa*. We have to think of ourselves as the devotee, and think of the *Iṣṭa Devatā* as the manifestation of the Paramātman.

Swami Brahmananda used to tell us, 'Try to meditate within the shrine of your own heart. What this shrine is will be revealed to you as you continue the practice.'[18] That is only true. Spiritual discipline is necessary in order to know what is meant by *cidākāśa* or heart. At first you may think that it is like the *mahākāśa*, external space; later on, you may think of it as the cosmo-mental world. The real heart or the *cidākāśa* is in the realm of pure consciousness. There the soul, the unit of consciousness, is eternally united with the infinite Spirit. You have to meditate on the *Iṣṭa Devatā* in that space in the heart.

Let us go back again to the Yoga aphorism of Patañjali already referred to, wherein he tells us how to do *japa*, viz. *tajjapastadartha-bhāvanam* ('Repeat the Word, thinking of the meaning, the content, the connotation of the Word'). What happens if we do that? Patañjali says: 'Obstacles are removed and a new spiritual consciousness awakens.'[19] With the help of *japa* and simple *dhyāna* obstacles are removed. How does this happen? We can explain it this way: We are always creating worries and anxieties, always creating evil thoughts. These evil thoughts disturb our mind and sicken our body. The more we think of holy thoughts, the more we repeat the holy Word, and the more we meditate on the blissful Form of the Lord, the more the mind is set in abundant harmony. Illnesses — self-created — drop off. When harmony is established in the mind, this harmony reflects itself outwardly on the body. So mental health and, to some extent, physical health improve with the repetition of the divine Name, and we come to know its power. With the power of meditating on the holy Form a new spiritual consciousness that was lying hidden, that was potential, manifests itself. Then we discover that we are not just these bodies but are souls; and that the *Iṣṭa Devatā* is no other than the Paramātman, the source of supreme peace, supreme bliss, supreme love. Such is the power of the divine Name.

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[18] Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion*, op. cit., p. 269

Spiritual life is a life of service

We have already discussed seven steps of Yoga. What is the eighth step? According to Patañjali the eighth step is *samādhi*, in which you realize the Paramātman, the source of supreme spiritual bliss.

Sri Ramakrishna speaks about three types of *ānanda* or happiness.[20] The first one is *viṣayānanda*, i.e. the happiness that comes to us through the contact of the senses with the sense objects. The second is *bhajanānanda*, the joy that comes to us through *bhajana* (literally, worship), through *japa*, through *dhyāna*. And then comes finally, *brahmānanda*, the supreme Bliss that accrues from the realization of the infinite Spirit in *samādhi*. *Brahmānanda* is difficult to get. It is the culmination of hard struggle, and attainment of divine Grace. But even before we get that we can enjoy the bliss of worship. In spiritual life let us have as much *bhajanānanda* as we can. It is within the reach of all of us. The *ānanda* that comes to us through *japa*, through *dhyāna* on the blissful form of the Lord — let us share this joy with our fellow spiritual seekers. That is why, when devotees with such a spiritual outlook get together, they repeat the Lord's name, sing His glory. At least for the time being they forget the troubles of the world. The mind is transported to a higher plane, something of the *ānanda* of the supreme Being, something of the peace of the supreme Spirit, comes into their soul, but as I said, one should not stop with that. Our great teacher used to tell us, 'As you advance, you should also help others to advance.' One who is illumined alone can be the real teacher; but in order to be of service to others one need not be at the beginning fully illumined. I may be a student of a senior class and, when teachers are lacking, I can teach one of the lower classes, I can be of service to those who are in a lower class. Let us not wait for the fullest illumination. At every stage it is possible for us to be of some service to our fellow beings.

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[19] ततः प्रत्यकचेतनाधिगमोऽप्यन्तरायाभावश्च ॥

Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra*, 1.29

[20] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., p. 453

The religion that we learnt at the feet of the great disciples of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna, has taught us not to be egocentric, but to be dedicated to the service of God dwelling in all. Some words of Swami Vivekananda always come to my mind. 'First let us be gods and then help others to be gods.'[21] What did Swamiji mean by this? Each one of us should lead his life in such a way that he not only attains spiritual realization and is freed from all bonds, but also is able to promote the welfare of others. In the innermost core of our being, we have to realize the God-head; then we have to experience Him as manifest in all beings. Swamiji himself had this integral vision, and this realization of his is the inspiration and basis for the various forms of service of the Ramakrishna Movement: medical service, educational service, preaching and publication. The ideal is to serve the Divine in others. Just as we ourselves try to be free, we should also try to help others to be free. This is the integral path, the path of synthesis which we are all trying to put into practice. It contains all the four Yogas: *karma, dhyāna, bhakti* and *jñāna*.

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[21] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), Vol. IV, p. 351

The highest ideal, as Swami Vivekananda has said, is this: First let us ourselves be gods and then help others to be gods. If we advance to some extent, we can help others also to advance to some extent. That is how we have to put into practice Swamiji's great ideal: *ātmano mokṣārtham jagaddhitāya ca*. 'To work for our own illumination and spiritual emancipation and at the same time to render service to others.'[22] As we improve, we can also help others to improve in our own humble way. As we do our spiritual practices, as we progress in our spiritual path, let us try to be of service to others — this is the twofold way which will help us to attain inner purity, which will help us to attain divine Presence, divine Love, and divine Bliss. There is this great ideal before us, and let us proceed, each one in his own way, towards its attainment step by step; let us be sure of every inch of the ground.

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[22] ibid., Vol. VI (1972), p. 504

CHAPTER 19

ESSENTIALS OF MEDITATIVE LIFE

The Path before us

First of all, it is essential on our part to hold before us the spiritual ideal clearly. According to the ancient school of thought known as the Sāṁkhya, there are only two types of entities — the Puruṣa or the Soul which is of the nature of pure Consciousness, and the Prakṛti or Nature. Vedānta calls the soul of man the Ātman and says that all souls are parts of an infinite, all-pervading supreme Spirit called the Paramātman or Brahman. Hence Self-realization in Vedānta means God-realization. Those of us who believe in the existence of the Ātman or the soul and the Paramātman, the Soul of our souls, aspire to have our union with Him, within us and in all beings. Realization of the all-pervading Divine is the goal of our spiritual life.

When as students, we approached the great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, they placed before us the ideal of Self-realization. But by Self-realization they did not mean anything exclusive. They told us clearly that the more one approaches one's higher Self, the more one experiences the supreme Spirit and the more one feels He is manifest in all. And then what follows is, one feels like serving the Lord in all. But, before that, one must try to follow the spiritual path through prayer and worship, get a clear conception of one's own soul and the nature of the Deity who dwells in everyone.

Now, since this is the ideal, the question arises: What path should we follow? And here too they placed before us the two-fold ideal of salvation and service. Work and worship should go hand in hand. Work is to be performed in the spirit of serving the Lord who dwells in all beings. We perform activities of various kinds, but we do not know how to do it, how to perform our duties, how to engage ourselves in various activities for our spiritual benefit. Work has to be done at first in a spirit of duty. Duty must be performed under all circumstances and then, as we advance, we feel we have to offer all the fruits of our work to the supreme Spirit who is the presiding Deity of all forms of activities. Then there comes a time when we ask: why should we work? The answer too then wells up within us: for pleasing the Lord. And there may yet come a time when we feel the divine Presence permeating and interpenetrating us. Then we just become channels for the flow of divine Power — the divine Power that works for the good of mankind.

Be spiritually hungry

Just as work is to be done in the proper spirit, so also is worship to be performed in the right manner. All of us have to perform work of some kind or other. Work is compulsory, but the trouble is, worship is optional! Most of us do not feel inclined to do any worship, or *japa* or meditation, and that is the pity of it. If we are hungry spiritually, we would like to take spiritual food. We feed our body; we should feed the body with good healthy food. We feed our mind through our studies — the ideas should be good. Similarly we should feed the soul. How to do it? Through the practice of worship, *japa*, meditation.

There is a parable of Sri Ramakrishna: A child was going to bed and said, 'Mummy, if I feel hungry, please wake me up', and the mother said, 'I need not do that. Your hunger itself will wake you up.' [1] There comes a time in the course of the evolution of the soul when we become spiritually hungry and wake up from our age-long slumber. But then, mere waking up is not enough. We must be up and doing. I am reminded of a remarkable saying of the Holy Mother. She said: 'The room may contain different kinds of food-stuff, but one must cook them. He who cooks earlier gets his meals earlier too.' [2] Many of us are lazy, we do not want to cook at the proper time; may be, we want to cook but late in the evening; and some are so lazy that they would rather starve than cook their food! Naturally, they cannot get much out of spiritual life and they feel miserable.

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[1] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), pp. 93, 424

[2] *Sri Sarada Devi the Holy Mother* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1958), p. 520

What Brahmananda taught

When we try to sit quietly and do some form of mental worship, some form of *japa* or meditation, at first we come across many obstacles. This is only natural, as Swami Brahmananda used to tell us. Here let me do a little reading from *The Eternal Companion,* the book which contains the spiritual teachings of the Swami. He says:

> Practise *japa* and meditation regularly. Do not miss even one day. The mind is like a spoiled child — always restless. Try repeatedly to steady it, by fixing it on the Chosen Ideal, and at last you will become absorbed in Him. If you continue your practice for two or three years, you will begin to feel an unspeakable joy and the mind will become steady. In the beginning the practice of *japa* and meditation seems dry. It is like taking bitter medicine. You must forcibly pour the thought of God into your mind, then as you persist, you will be flooded with joy. What a terrible ordeal a student undergoes to pass his examination. To realize God is a far easier task! Call on Him sincerely with a tranquil heart.[3]

The disciple to whom he was speaking said, 'At times I feel that with all my struggle I am making no progress. It all seems unreal. Despair takes hold of me.' The Swami gave him hope:

> No, no. There is no cause for despair. The effect of meditation is inevitable. You are bound to get results if you practise *japa* with devotion, or even without it, for devotion will follow. Continue your practice regularly for a little longer. You will find peace. One's health also is improved if one meditates.
>
> Meditation in the primary stage is like waging a war with the mind. With effort the restless mind has to be brought under control and placed at the feet of the Lord. But in the beginning,

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[3] Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1971), pp. 335-6

> take care that you do not overtax your brain. Go slowly, then gradually intensify your effort. Through regular practice, the mind will become steady and meditation will be easier. You will no longer feel any strain even while sitting for long hours in contemplation.
>
> Just as after a deep sleep a man feels refreshed in body and mind, so will you feel refreshed after meditation and there will follow an intense experience of happiness.
>
> The body and the mind are closely related. When the body is disturbed, the mind also becomes disturbed. Therefore particular care must be given to the diet in order to keep the body healthy. . . .
>
> Meditation is not such an easy matter. When you have eaten too much, the mind becomes restless. Also unless you keep lust, anger, greed and such other passions under control, the mind will remain unsteady. How can you meditate with an unsteady mind?. . .
>
> Unless you meditate, you cannot control the mind and unless the mind is controlled, you cannot meditate. But if you think, 'First let me control the mind and then I shall meditate', you will never succeed. You must steady your mind and meditate at the same time.
>
> As you sit down to meditate, think of the cravings of the mind as mere dreams. See them as unreal. They can never attach themselves to the mind. Feel that you are pure. In this way purity will gradually fill your mind. . . .
>
> If you wish to realize God, practise the spiritual disciplines with patience and perseverance. In due course you will be enlightened.[4]

When the supreme Being is realized, the illumined soul attains peace and blessedness and shares this peace and blessedness with his fellow beings. That is the ideal the Swami held before us, and he placed before us also the practice which we should follow with a view to realizing the ideal.

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[4] ibid., pp. 336-9

Early stages

As I said, when you wish to sit quietly, many types of disturbances arise in the mind. Sometimes, when you are not sitting for meditation, you may feel an amount of calmness; but the moment you sit for meditation, your mind becomes turbulent. Not only that. The body may start aching, the senses again may start running riot, and no end of wild thoughts may start rising in the mind. And *japa* and meditation become a great struggle, but this struggle has to be gone through.

The mystics of all religions place before us the ideal of attaining first of all a basic minimum of purity — purity of the body, purity of the senses, purity of the mind, and also purity of the ego. The body may be suffering from some disease and so the different organs of the body may not coordinate or function properly. Our senses are all outgoing, eager to come in touch with the sense objects. Our mind is swayed by past impressions. And then again, there is another type of conflict in our mind: our thinking goes one way, feeling goes another way, will goes a third way, and besides that, our ego is perverse. The ego is like a bubble, but the little bubble thinks too much of itself. It forgets the other bubbles, it forgets even the ocean, and wants to grow. What happens? The bubble bursts. And this actually happens with many human beings.

Now, let us not be terrified by all these troubles that appear before us. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā* we find Arjuna complaining to the Lord: 'You speak of mental control, you speak of Self-realization. But I find my mind is most turbulent: I cannot control it.' The Master recognized the difficulty of the student, and with great sympathy and love said: 'Yes, what you say is right, but by following the proper means, through the practice of detachment and constant meditation, this turbulent mind — which appears to be uncontrollable — can be controlled.' [5] Eventually we come in touch with the supreme Spirit, the Soul of our souls, the Soul of the universe.

Don't complain about the environment

Let us first of all note that we often complain too much about our environment. We really do not want to do anything except always complain about the environment. Suppose we change the environment — well, the same complaint will be there. We do not find anywhere an ideal environment: such a thing does not exist. You make this plea: 'Environment is not favourable, how can I practise meditation?' Well, right here you have to practise meditation. Do you not try to sleep in the midst of the most troublesome environment? Similarly you have to try to practise meditation whatever be the nature of the environment. How? By withdrawing yourself from all outside disturbances, just as you do before you sleep. This can be done by practice. Then again, we have our physical troubles. May be the body is having some trouble. Many a time we hear complaints like: 'Ah, Swamiji, when I sit for meditation I get a headache.' Well, for some people meditation itself is a headache! Anyway, try to be healthy. That is why Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa says in the chapter on the Yoga of meditation in the *Gītā*: 'Yoga is easy and destroys sorrow for a man who is regulated and moderate in his food, recreation, work, sleep and wakefulness.'[6] One should follow the middle path avoiding the extremes. This gives one strength and vigour to follow the spiritual path.

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[5] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 6.33-36

Train the body first

Some form of discipline is to be practised so that our body may be trained to some extent. Then the senses are to be trained and also the mind. Not only that, the ego should also be trained.

How do you train the body? Take care of your food: avoid overeating and select the food that agrees with you and conduces to the harmony of the body. Many people think eating food is the greatest exercise for the stomach! That is not enough. Apart from eating healthy food, you must also have some exercise of all the limbs, specially some exercise of the stomach, so that your digestion, assimilation, and evacuation can be as good as possible. These are the rules, primary rules, that are to be followed. Our ancient teachers said: 'The first duty is to take care of the body which is the means for the pursuit of spiritual life.'[7] I see sometimes weaklings coming and saying 'I want to forget my body.' What body have they got? A mass of flesh and bones! Develop the body properly. You can never forget the body if it is not in a healthy condition.

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[6] ibid., 6.17

Moral discipline

The teacher of Yoga, Patañjali, is unwilling to give any instruction on *āsana* or posture unless and until the spiritual seeker is to some extent established in what he calls *yama* and *niyama*. The spiritual seeker should practise non-violence, should tell the truth, should not be greedy, should practise continence as much as possible, and should not depend on others helplessly. This is what he calls *yama*.[8] And even that is not enough. He says that one should practise an amount of purity, external and internal. One should try to be contented, adjusted to one's own environment as much as possible. One should practise the threefold discipline — of the body, of speech, and of the mind. Further, one should study the scriptures and assimilate the ideas. Even that is not enough; egocentric activity is no good. One must try to surrender oneself completely to the supreme Spirit whom the devotee discovers later on to be the Soul of his soul. All these come under *niyama*.[9]

Swami Brahmananda used to tell us, ' "I will conquer lust, I will conquer anger and greed", if that is your approach, you can never conquer them; but if you can fix your mind on God, the passions will leave you of themselves', 'You can never be fully established in morality unless you believe in God.'[10] By God he did not mean any extra-cosmic Being. In the beginning we may think of God as a Being or Power who has brought this world into being, who sustains it, and who takes it back. As we progress, we find that the Power which we thought was outside is not only a Power, but also a Presence within, and advancing further we see and feel the presence of the Divine in all.

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[7] शरीरमाद्यं खलु धर्म साधनम्।

[8] Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra* 2.30

[9] ibid., 2.32

[10] *The Eternal Companion*, op. cit., p. 245

Cultivate mental harmony

Sometimes people come and say, 'Swami, I want to forget everything including my mind.' What sort of mind have they got? Swami Vivekananda used to have a pun on the word 'mind'. In Bengali, we call it 'mon'. Now, 'mon' also means 'a maund' i.e. 80 lbs. And so, the great Swami used to ask the youngsters who went to him: 'Has your mind got the weight of 80 pounds or only a 'chatak' (two ounces)? What sort of mind have you?' The mind is to be developed. The will is to be developed. Thoughts and feelings are to be developed. Only then comes the question of transcending the mind. It is a difficult task but if there is spiritual aspiration, all this becomes easy. Where there is a will, there is a way.

When you want to pass an examination (especially in India where every young man, instead of struggling for knowledge, is over-anxious to get some appointment to maintain himself and his family), what an amount of trouble you take! That is because you have an ideal to strive for. In spiritual life also if we keep the spiritual ideal living and bright before us, everything becomes easy. All the trouble that we take would be worth taking.

Let us remind ourselves of the wonderful analogy we have in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad.* The Upaniṣad says that the body is like a chariot, senses are like horses, the mind is like the rein, intellect is like the charioteer, and the Ātman is the master of the chariot.[11] As the chariot moves, if some of the wheels come off and roll away, can it proceed? Horses have become restive, turbulent. In order to control the horses, you have to hold the reins tight. And the master of the chariot must ask the charioteer to be wide-awake. But what usually happens is: the master goes to sleep, the charioteer becomes drunk, the reins become slack, and then the horses start running wild; fortunately there is no great disaster. So, before any disaster comes, let us be wide-awake; let the master of the chariot be wide-awake. Let him ask the charioteer to be alert and, with the help of the mind, control the senses, direct the senses along the right path. Then the chariot will move properly.

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[11] आत्मानं रथिनं विद्धि शरीरं रथमेव तु।
बुद्धिं तु सारथिं विद्धि मनः प्रग्रहमेव च॥
इन्द्रियाणि हयानाहुः . . . . . .
Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.3.3

But let us remember, none of us can suddenly attain perfection in spiritual disciplines. A certain minimum progress is necessary so that our body, mind and senses are in a harmonious state. And the ego, the perverse ego, should be in a mood to come in touch with the cosmic Will that lies behind our little will. When to some extent we have become established — remember, to some extent — in bringing about harmony first in the body, then in the mind and the senses, and when we have succeeded in awakening in us spiritual aspiration — when we have done all this to some extent, then we may start with *āsana* (posture) which is the actual first step in the path of meditation.

Posture (Āsana)

Remember, it is only after the practice of *yama* and *niyama* to some extent that Patañjali, the teacher of Yoga, asks us to sit in a certain posture. What is the posture that we should choose? The definition is: 'Posture is that which is firm and pleasant.' [12] Select that posture in which you can sit steadily and in which you feel at ease. Some one may ask: 'May I lie down?' Well, you may lie down, and practise it as an *āsana*, but you take an amount of risk: that posture is usually associated with sleep. By lying down and trying to practise meditation, you may not progress at all. You may have a little good nap and that may refresh you but will make you spiritually dull. 'Worship is possible in a sitting posture' [13] — that is what Vyāsa says. Sitting posture is better, but take care that it is a relaxed posture in which you feel relaxed in body as well as in mind. If you wish to practise *yogāsanas* as an exercise, you may do that some other time. But when you sit for meditation you should sit firm, relaxed in body and mind.

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[12] स्थिरसुखमासनम् ।
Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra*, 2.46

[13] आसीनः सम्भवात् ।
Bädarāyaṇa. *Brahma-Sūtra* 4.1.7

Pray for all

After sitting, remember the Lord. He is our Ideal, He is the indwelling Spirit. He is inside and outside. You may chant a prayer. Be a little musical. Let your mind, your senses and the body vibrate with a little spiritual vibration. Then salute the supreme Being. One great danger in spiritual life, when we follow a particular path, is that we are likely to be very fanatical. So it is very good to salute not only the supreme Spirit, but also the great Teachers and saints of your country and of all countries of the world. What happens then? The mind becomes broad.

Another danger in spiritual life is to be extremely selfish. Many a time, I have found that at least in the beginning of spiritual life, spiritual seekers think too much of themselves. They forget about others. So it is good to pray not only for one's own welfare but also for the welfare of all. Just as you aspire after peace, you want to attain purity, you want to attain illumination, so also pray for peace, purity and enlightenment for everybody. 'Let all people move towards the supreme Being. Let all people become pure. Let all people become illumined.' This kind of prayer has a broadening effect on our mind.

You will be astonished to see how quickly this kind of prayer soothes your nerves and calms your mind. Besides expanding our consciousness to some extent, this kind of prayer and salutation greatly helps us in the practice of meditation.

Significance of breathing

At this stage a little practice of rhythmic breathing is very helpful. Take a deep breath, and slowly breathe out. You need not hold the breath or close the nostrils. Just breathe in and breathe out in a steady, regulated way through both the nostrils. But give suggestions to the mind: 'I am breathing in purity, strength and peace.' The infinite Being is the source of all peace. As a matter of fact, in spiritual life, we cannot have enough of purity, enough of strength and peace; the more we get, the better. Fill yourselves with divine purity, divine strength and divine peace. Breathe out purity. Send forth currents of purity to everybody. Have sympathy for all; be friendly towards all. You will be surprised to find how easy it will be for you to rise to higher planes of consciousness if you have succeeded in culturing this mood because when we are in this mood, it is easy to detach our senses from their objects.

Spiritualize desires

The senses want to come into touch with the outer world. Control the senses; give the senses an inward turn as the Upaniṣadic seers did. Spiritualize the activities of the senses. As the Vedic prayer goes: 'O gods, may we hear with our ears what is auspicious. O ye adorable ones, may we see with our eyes what is auspicious.' [14] Hear what is good; speak what is good; see what is good. Give a good direction to the senses. Let them be spiritualized.

Next comes the mind which is always trying to run riot. How to calm the mind? All kinds of desires and passions create troubles to the mind. Cultivate the spiritual mood, a little of the mood of expanded consciousness. Think that these distractions are illusory and dreamlike. Tell yourself: 'Don't be afraid of lust, anger, greed, infatuation, pride and malice. Don't be afraid at all.' Spiritualize them. Yearn to have the divine communion. Get angry with your anger, get angry with all that stands in your way — not with people. Covet the supreme Being who is the greatest wealth. If you want to feel proud, feel proud thinking you are a child of God, and so on. Then what happens? All our desires are given a spiritual turn. They no longer trouble us; they may even be of help to us in spiritual life.

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[14] *Ṛg-Veda,* 1.89.8

There is a wrong conception prevailing among a section of people. Some shallow psychologists say to spiritual aspirants: 'You are all suppressing or repressing your emotions.' We do not do anything of that kind. We want to store up the energy of our senses and the mind. We want to direct this energy along the spiritual path. We want to sing the glory of the Lord. We want to visualize the form of the supreme Being. We want the senses to be directed inwards so that there comes a time in the life of the spiritual seeker when he comes to develop new eyes for seeing the Invisible, new ears for hearing the divine Voice, or 'the music of the spheres' and enjoy the fun of all that is going on eternally. One is able to play with the divine Being; but all this is only on the way. We have to go further.

The temple of the Divine

In the well-known *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* analogy already referred to, the body is likened to a chariot. Another analogy is that the body is a temple of which the region of the heart is the sanctum sanctorum. This is a grand conception. In this temple, you find there is the devotee and also there is the Deity. You must be able to bring about the union of the two. But this temple is a very peculiar one. Our little physical body is permeated and interpenetrated by our mental body or the subtle body. The subtle body again is interpenetrated and permeated by the Jīvātman (individual soul), and the Jīvātman is part of the Paramātman (supreme Soul). And as we succeed in making the body, the subtle body, the senses, and the mind harmonious, we become more and more conscious of the divine Light that shines within us. So, we enter the sanctuary of the 'heart', find that the 'heart' is filled with the light of the Ātman and that this light is a part of the Paramātman.

How to meditate

If you want to follow the formless meditation, merge your body, mind, the whole world and everything into God. Think: 'I am a little sphere of light, and the supreme Being is the infinite sphere of light, shining everywhere.' But so long as we have body consciousness and too much of the sense of personality, we cannot practise this type of meditation. So, now think that your soul is putting on a pure subtle body (i.e. mental body), and a pure physical body, and that the infinite Spirit takes the form of the *Iṣṭa Devatā*, the divine Ideal we worship.

Now visualize: In the infinite divine Light which is also infinite Love and infinite Bliss, we have the devotee and we have the Deity who is the embodiment of infinite Light, infinite Love and Bliss. Repeat some appropriate divine Name (*mantra*) and meditate on Him.

First of all, meditate on the blissful luminous divine Form of the *Iṣṭa Devatā*. Then meditate on His infinite purity, His infinite love, His infinite compassion. Finally, meditate on His infinite Consciousness in which He is, as it were, drowned.

What happens? As one goes on repeating the divine Name and meditating on the divine Being, moving from one aspect to another, a remarkable change takes place. Through moral practice we succeed, as I said, in establishing an amount of harmony; but the harmony that is established by meditating on the Lord, is of a superior kind. When real harmony is established in our mind, in our soul, in a spontaneous way, we feel we are in touch with the cosmic harmony. Even our body is a part of the cosmic Body — the *Virāṭ-Puruṣa*. Our mind is a part of the cosmic Mind — the *Hiraṇyagarbha*. Our soul is a part of the cosmic Spirit — the Īśvara. Many who practise spiritual discipline and meditation attain to this state of consciousness. If we follow the way of *japa* and meditation correctly, we are sure to be blessed with some form of divine vision, some form of divine experience. That increases our faith and makes our mind steady in the path of meditation.

Our mind wants to run away from the object of meditation. But through the practice of moral culture, we should succeed in minimizing these disturbances of the mind. And further, as we do our *japa* and meditation we give the mind a certain theme, that is, the divine Name we repeat and the divine Form we visualize. All these serve to focus the mind and hold our attention within. We must think of Him with a little love in our heart. When there is some love and devotion in our heart for the Chosen Ideal, it becomes easy for us to follow the path of *japa* and meditation.

And what *japa* and meditation do is this: they keep the mind engaged. They hold it within. The Name, the divine Form, and the idea, along with love for God keep the mind concentrated within. When our interest in the object of meditation becomes greater than our interest in outside things, the object of meditation becomes more and more real to us. The mind at least for a little while dwells on the supreme Spirit, dwells on divine blissful Form, dwells on the noble attributes. Then comes the time when one feels the divine Presence. In the lives of spiritual seekers we find that at this stage many are blessed with the spiritual vision of the divine Form. The divine Being manifests Himself in some aspect or other; He then becomes the *Guru*.

The Guru is within

Our teachers tell us that the *Guru* is within. We may take the help of an outside teacher at the beginning of our spiritual life, but as we advance, we find the real *Guru* is inside, and we must place ourselves at the feet of the divine *Guru* within. He takes the disciple step by step from lower rungs of spiritual experience to higher and higher rungs. That is what happened to the saints, the saints we have met. If we know how to tune our minds properly we can 'hear' the experiences of saints, their songs, the outpouring of their hearts, the expression of their spiritual realizations, their instructions. These experiences actually take place. If we sincerely follow the spiritual path, after having fulfilled some of the conditions, we are sure to get some spiritual results.

Self-surrender to the Lord

The results of meditation are sure to follow, but as we go on with our *japa* and meditation, let us not look for the results too much. Results will come by themselves. By being over-anxious about the results, we will be forgetting to do our spiritual practice properly, and here comes the most important question of self-surrender. Patañjali, the Yoga teacher, says 'By sacrificing all to Īśvara comes *samādhi.*' [15] Surrender yourself completely, offer all the fruits of your labour, of your spiritual practice to the supreme Being. Learn to connect your little will to the divine Will, and then a miracle takes place. That Truth, that Reality which shines within, which also shines outside in all beings, reveals Itself in all Its glory, and then comes the communion between the soul and the Oversoul. Swami Vivekananda has given us a definition of religion; it is 'the eternal relation between the eternal soul and the eternal God.'[16] But in order to realize this, we have to practise various disciplines with single-minded devotion.

Cultivate a definite attitude

Here comes a very important question of finding out where you stand. Find out with what attitude you have to approach the supreme Being. Very few of us are competent to approach the supreme Being as the Soul of our souls. We are like children. We want to depend on the divine Being, just as a child depends on the father or the mother. We need a friend, we need a life's companion, we need one who would love us, whom we can make the centre of our love, the centre of our emotion. Now, the Lord is there, He is manifest in these countless divine Forms and relations. Take up any one of them. In our study of the various sects of Hinduism we find that the devotee begins his spiritual life with the worship of God as the Master, as the Father, as the Mother or even as the divine Child. There are devotees who would like to love the Lord as Child Kṛṣṇa, or Child Rāma. Other devotees would like to worship the Mother of the universe, in Her different aspects as Durgā, Kālī, Umā, or Kumārī. Through all these forms of worship, or meditation the mind and heart become pure. As has already been said, the purity that we attain through the practice of morals is not enough. We want a higher type of purity, the purity that enables the soul to detach itself not only from the body, the senses, and the mind, but also from the little ego — the last bondage that the soul has to overcome — and this is possible only in the higher type of worship or meditation we have described above.

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[15] समाधिसिद्धिरीश्वरप्रणिधानात् ।

Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra,* 2.45

[16] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1964), Vol. III, p. 4

One Self in all

The union between the Ātman and the Paramātman is to be brought about. And as the supreme Being, the supreme Teacher, reveals His glory, the devotee realizes that the God he has been worshipping is not only inside but is also manifest in all. And then begins a new life, a fuller life. As Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa says in the *Gītā*: 'With the heart concentrated by Yoga with the eye of evenness for all things, he beholds the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self.'[17] Now the devotee realizes that the Ātman that is inside is also outside, and seeing the Lord manifest in all, he worships Him in everyone.

For one's own salvation and the world's welfare

Now, here is a point to understand. Even long before we attain this higher spiritual experience, even when we are worshipping only the personal aspect of God, something of this higher universal attitude must be cultivated. If I approach God, looking upon Him as the Master, and myself as the servant, let me not at the same time, forget my fellow beings. We are all servants of the supreme Spirit. If we look upon God as our Father or Mother, then let us look upon our fellow beings as children of the same God. If we are bold enough to think of God as the Soul of our souls, then let us remember, we are all fellow souls eternally connected with the supreme Spirit and, through our connection with the supreme Spirit, connected with one another. Then our life takes a new turn. The great ones who told us, 'Work and worship should go hand in hand', told us also, 'Hold this ideal before you: "For one's own salvation and for the good of the world".' You have to strive for your own spiritual illumination or spiritual freedom. At the same time, strive to promote the welfare of all. The illumined soul alone can see God in everyone, and his service is spontaneous. But those of us who are still in ignorance must strongly imagine that we are all connected with one another through the divine Spirit and, as we try to promote our welfare, let us also try to promote the welfare of all.

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[17] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 6.29

Here the instruction we received, 'Work and worship should go hand in hand', comes to have a new meaning. As we progress in meditation, as we try to grow inwardly, we should work not only for the members of our family but also for the welfare of others. What a beautiful order would have been in the world if this were practised! If each of us thought of others as he would think of himself, we would surely get much more. Ordinarily in a selfish mood, we think, 'Well, I am interested only in myself.' But when the outlook broadens, we feel we are all parts of a greater Whole, and then we feel great kinship and nearness with everybody. And when everybody tries to apply the ideal of 'work and worship' in actual life with this outlook, our lives will become sweeter and fruitful, and spiritual awareness will be an accomplished fact.

And as we do our spiritual practice and service let us not be egocentric. Let us offer all the fruits of our labour to the supreme Spirit. Sri Ramakrishna has said, 'If we move towards God one step, He comes towards us ten steps.' It is a fact to be realized in the world of the Spirit. So proceed. May the supreme Spirit ever protect and guide you, and fill your heart with His divine Presence, Purity, Love and Bliss!

CHAPTER 20

CONCENTRATION AND MEDITATION

All concentration is not meditation

It is important to know the difference between ordinary concentration and meditation. By the word 'meditation' we mean *dhyāna* or contemplation. It is not just ordinary concentration. It is a special type of concentration. In the first place, meditation is a fully conscious process, an exercise of the will. Secondly, meditation means concentration on a spiritual idea which presupposes that the aspirant is capable of rising above worldly ideas. And finally, meditation is done usually at a particular centre of consciousness. It is clear that true meditation is a fairly advanced state, attained after long practice. It is the result of long years of discipline.

What is ordinarily known as meditation does not deserve the name. The mind is upset by various evil thoughts and tendencies, and worldly matters turn the mind away from the contemplation of God. To attempt time and again to draw the mind inward and fix it on God is the case with the majority of spiritual aspirants. Such a state is usually styled meditation. Really, it is *pratyāhāra*, withdrawing the outgoing mind. To keep the mind in the contemplation of the same thought for a short space of time is the next stage called *dhāraṇa*. When the outgoing tendencies are controlled and the mind flows continuously as a current in the contemplation of God, it is real meditation or *dhyāna*.

The concentration of a worldly man on his gross material gain, profit and enjoyment; the concentration of a scientist on his experiments, as for instance, on the structure of an atom or the constitution of a plant; the concentration of a psychologist on the movements and laws of thought; the concentration of a *yogī* on the analysis of the ego and the non-ego — all these are but different forms of concentration, judged from the objective point of view. But considered from the subjective point of view, their contents differ very widely, and they lead to altogether different experiences and results. The concentration of a spiritual aspirant — whatever the path he follows — is alone called *dhyāna* or meditation or contemplation.

The Yogic seeker after Truth, having no faith in God as ordinarily understood, may begin with meditation on gross elements associated with time and space, and then take up the elements beyond the limitations of time and space. He may next take up the subtle elements as the objects of his concentration and meditation, at first within time and space, and later on, beyond their limits. Proceeding further, he may first make the mind or the 'inner organ', and afterwards the ego itself, the object of his concentration and meditation. And knowing the true nature of these objects he ceases to identify himself with these limiting adjuncts, and having come nearer to his true Self he enjoys a wonderful state of bliss and illumination.

The Vedāntic aspirant who believes in the existence of the Divine, may at the beginning meditate on the physical form (an image or a picture) of some great holy Personality or a symbolic representation of the Divine first associated with time and space and then without these limitations. Advancing further he may meditate on the 'heart' of the holy Personality or on the divine Mind, and gradually imbibe the noble attributes associated with it. Later, he may pass on to pure Consciousness, individual or cosmic, and thereby succeed in purifying and expanding his impure, limited consciousness, come in touch with the infinite Being within his self, and even proceed to the highest divine realization in which the meditator, like a salt-doll coming into contact with the ocean, gets merged into the Absolute Divine Principle. Thus, beginning with different forms of concentration and meditation associated with individual consciousness, he may reach the highest super-consciousness — the Absolute Reality, the one undivided Principle — in which all subject-object relationship, nay, all relativity, is completely transcended.

Concentration by itself may not have any spiritual value. As has already been said, it may even be dangerous if the person who practises it has not already attained a certain amount of mental purification, and does not continue the process of sublimation at the same time. Concentration and meditation become spiritually effective to the extent the mind is purified of its dross, of all the dirt, bad impressions and tendencies that have been allowed to accumulate through successive evil thoughts and actions. With the attainment of great dispassion and purity alone can the aspirant take up successfully the higher forms of concentration and meditation, ultimately leading to the highest divine experience and freedom.

Every average person has the capacity to practise concentration although it is usually directed towards persons or objects of gain and enjoyment presented to him by the world. In order to follow the spiritual life, no new faculties need be created all of a sudden. The old capacities and tendencies are to be given a Godward turn without diminishing their intensity, and then the worldly man is transformed into a spiritual man. So the true devotee prays, 'Lord, may I think of Thee with that strong love which the ignorant cherish for the things of the world, and may that love never cease to abide in my heart.'[1]

Need for discipline

Our mind is always out to deceive us and play tricks on us. Therefore we need a strict daily discipline in everything we do. How to get the necessary mental training? That is the main problem in meditative life. Different thoughts constantly keep cropping up in our minds. When we wish to make the mind calm, the mind becomes most disturbed. It revolts the very moment we try to concentrate. It suddenly takes the form of a mighty ocean in which we are in danger of being drowned. The whole surface of the mind is disturbed by strong thought waves, and the more we try to calm it, the stronger these become. So meditation makes us very tired in the beginning instead of soothing us and bringing us light as it should.

As in the case of a horse-trainer who has to take great trouble to break the horse, we shall have to follow a certain definite system of discipline with great doggedness and tenacity in order to 'break' the mind. In spiritual discipline there must be great definiteness regarding everything. It won't do for us to put two legs in two different boats. We must learn to follow one course definitely, step by step, without vacillating, if we wish to reach the goal one day.

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[1] या प्रीतिरविवेकानां विषयेष्वनपायिनी ।
त्वामनुस्मरतः सा मे हृदयान्माऽपसर्पतु ॥
Viṣṇu Purāṇa 1.20.17

The cravings of the flesh, our desires, usually stand in the way of real religion. The sham thing you ordinarily see in life, going to places of worship and hearing religious instruction and then doing just as one pleases, is not true religion. This kind of thing may have proved highly profitable for the church, but it is not following Christ's teachings. Proper discipline is essential for all forms of spiritual practice, and without spiritual practice there can never be anything like true religion. The early Christians knew this perfectly well. So did many of the great mystics of the Middle Ages. But now the whole tradition seems to be lost in the West; and that is why the West is sinking to the level of the brute.

As has been mentioned before, the mind is very much like an unruly horse which has to be broken. When we want to ride it, the horse acts in two ways: it either becomes very much restive or simply lies down and refuses to move. It does not wish to be steady. In order to break this unruly horse of our mind a certain amount of ethical culture is necessary. So long as the thought of sex and money is allowed to dominate it, it cannot be broken.

Need for purification of mind

If you attempt meditation without having attained purity of mind, you are likely to concentrate more on the impurities of the mind than on God. The higher centres must open in order to enable the aspirant to dwell on higher thoughts for long. Here comes the importance of prayer and doing good work.

The novice should never be allowed to follow the path of exclusive meditation. In our monastic Order we never allow this. So long as you are not a perfect master of your thoughts, too much meditation is dangerous for you in the early period of your spiritual life. When you sit alone and try to quieten the mind, forbidden impure thoughts begin to rise in your mind and create confusion. These may even overpower you. It is better to spend only short periods in meditation in the early stages. The rest of the time must be usefully spent in work, service, or studies.

This was what Christian monasticism learnt from the lives of Christian ascetics of the early centuries. Since then the Catholic Church has wisely enforced a combination of useful work along with contemplation.

Without attaining a certain amount of sublimation and purification of the feelings and desires, concentration becomes very dangerous in the case of persons who have not prepared themselves properly for the higher life. It may lead to very bad effects. In a way, we all make the mind concentrated, but then we do not know how to manipulate it. This concentrated mind will run after sensual enjoyments and all kinds of worldly distractions and objects with a greater intensity for having become concentrated. So if we do not know how to handle the mind in the right way, it may lead us astray. It is far better not to have concentration if one does not attain sublimation and purification at the same time. Therefore, the necessity of purity, non-injury, truthfulness, continence, etc. in thought, word and deed, has to be stressed very much. Without sublimation of all our desires and feelings, we cannot progress in the spiritual path. It is only after we have followed a strict code of ethics and morals that we should attempt concentration and meditation. The concentrated mind, if it is not purified, becomes a veritable demon and creates no end of troubles for the spiritual aspirant.

Physical as well as mental purity is absolutely necessary. Sometimes we make the mistake of stressing only physical purity because it is so much more difficult to achieve true mental purity. There are many who satisfy themselves by taking baths, but who do not trouble themselves to have a pure mind. It is, however, impossible to concentrate a dirty mind on higher things. So long as there is the impure thought of woman in a man or of man in a woman, real higher concentration is out of the question for him or her. There may not be any gross physical relations, but it is sex all the same, and so long as there is any form of sex, purity has not been achieved, and without purity higher spiritual life remains very far off.

Posture

The next point is a steady posture (*āsana*), usually a sitting posture. Patañjali prescribes any posture that is steady and pleasant.[2] Squatting, no doubt, is very helpful because the weight of the body is perfectly balanced in that posture. But it must be easy, otherwise it will disturb the mind of the person trying to attempt spiritual practice. For Indians it is natural, but for many western people it may necessitate quite a lot of practice, and some may not be able to do it all. Anyway, for those who can, squatting is the best posture for spiritual practice.

Rhythmic breathing

There are some people who find rhythmic breathing very helpful. Mind and breath are always interrelated and always act on each other. While doing *prāṇāyāma* the proportion of inhalation, retention and exhalation of breath should be 1:4:2. But it is not advisable to practise *prāṇāyāma* in the case of people who are too busy or immoderate. But just simple regulated breathing is good for all. However, mere retention of air is not enough. If it were so, a football bladder would be the greatest of all the *yogīs* of the world! Along with rhythmic breathing we must think intensely of purity. 'Everything is pure. I myself am pure, I am the embodiment of purity' — give such strong suggestions to your mind. Feel that, with every breath, your body and mind are becoming purer and purer. Inhale purity, exhale purity, fill yourself with purity. Inhale calmness, exhale calmness, fill yourself wholly with calmness. Or, inhale peace, exhale all mental disturbance. Inhale dispassion and renunciation, exhale all that is impure in your body and mind. Inhale strength, exhale all weakness and fear. Go on giving these intense suggestions to your mind again and again before coming to real meditation.

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[2] Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra,* 2.46

Content of meditation

Meditation should not be focused on the void. The beginner should not try to create a void in him. If he does it, either he may doze off or the void gets filled with impure thoughts. Meditation must have some definite, positive spiritual content. Those who find meditation on the Formless too abstract should centre their feelings on some holy Form. This is very effective in two ways. It leads one away from one's ego, and sublimates one's feelings. If ever the picture of any person you used to love or hate troubles you, set up vividly the holy Form you have chosen as your Ideal (*Iṣṭam*) against that. Your feeling for the *Iṣṭam* should be pitched against the feeling you have for the person whose memory is now troubling you. Worldly pictures and feelings must be counteracted with pictures of and feelings for the Divine. Those who can do this progress quickly in spiritual life without much trouble. He who feels intense love and attraction for his *Iṣṭa Devatā* will find meditation easy.

Without ethical culture we can never come in close touch with the Divine. If, after creating a perfect void within, we are able to have the right thought, well and good. Then this kind of practice will be very useful. But it is very dangerous for a beginner, because he does not succeed in having the right thought after creating the void, but just falls asleep or is dominated by his subconscious mind. In the case of a beginner there is always the great danger of his mind falling below the threshold of consciousness.

Many people want to begin spiritual life from the topmost rung of the ladder, but that cannot be done. There are no long jumps in spiritual life; neither can anything be achieved without first finding out where one really stands. High philosophical flights and wonderful metaphysical dreams do not mean realization, and by themselves they never lead to realization, but only to abstract and superfine speculations that have no connection at all with real or practical life. They do not change in any way the life of the person who indulges in them. We should know where we stand, and then proceed from there. We must begin as beginners and go on step by step. As an ideal, Monism may be all right for us; but when we come down to the practical aspects, we are dualists and shall remain dualists for a long time to come. I am always amused when I hear somebody talking in high terms about the Absolute, the Principle, etc. because in most of these cases all these are nothing but empty speculations and frothy words. Those do not even show that a particular person is fit for the monistic path. Nobody who stands in Dualism, in whatever way this may be, is a monist, whether Monism appeals to him or not.

Very often the mind of the modern man revolts against the idea of rigid, formal meditation. He says, 'Why should we busy ourselves with that? Haven't we enough drudgery in the world? So why should we follow practices which do not appeal to us? We want the Absolute, so what is the use of *japa*, divine attributes or divine Forms? Let us reach the Absolute. Let us worship the Divine "in spirit and in truth!" ' All this, no doubt, sounds very grand and highly spiritual; but as soon as we come down to actual life we find that this kind of thinking does not produce anything at all. Mostly such people are confirmed dualists as far as their own actions in daily life go. To worship God 'in spirit and in truth' is all right as an ideal. But how many people really do it? — that is the point. For most people it means just hazy feeling and hazy thinking and acting in a way that has no connection at all with the Spirit or Truth.

Centre of consciousness

What next? After posture and rhythmic breathing, the thought of the Divine must be taken up. Where to think of the Divine? Where to have the centre of one's consciousness? Either in the head or in the heart. These two centres are safe for everybody. Never should a centre below the heart be chosen. Here instructions can be imparted only to individuals, because they differ from one another, but both head and heart are always safe. If we do not consciously raise the nervous current at least upto the level corresponding, more or less, to the place of the physical heart, no spiritual meditation becomes possible. This conscious raising of one's nervous currents leads one beyond all sensual temptations and establishes one firmly in morals and ethical culture. For the majority of people it is advisable to meditate in the heart. For highly emotional people the heart centre may not be suitable and may be avoided; they had better practise concentration in the head. They may later on come to the level of the heart, which is the gateway to superconsciousness.

The heart as a centre of consciousness

We use the word 'heart' very freely. But what do we really mean by it? Is it the physiological heart — that hollow muscular organ which by alternate contraction and dilation keeps up the circulation of blood in the body? Once a disciple asked Swami Brahmananda, 'Sir, in which centre should I meditate? Should it be the heart or the centre in the head?' Swami Brahmananda answered, 'My boy, meditation can be practised in any centre you please, but I would advise you at first to meditate in the heart. Meditate upon your *Iṣṭa Devatā* in the lotus of the heart.' Then the disciple asked again, 'But Maharaj, the heart is made of flesh and blood. How can I think of God there?' And Swami Brahmananda replied, 'I don't mean the anatomical heart. Think of the spiritual centre situated near the heart. In the beginning, as you think of the Lord inside the body, you may think of flesh and blood. But soon you will forget the body, and there will remain only the blissful form of the Chosen Ideal.' [3]

Sometimes we point to the region of the heart to indicate our emotions. We say: 'from the bottom of my heart', etc. That may be called the emotional 'heart'.

Apart from the physical and the emotional hearts there is another heart called the spiritual heart or the heart centre or the *anāhata cakra,* very often pictured as a lotus — the 'heart lotus'. It is the seat of intuition of higher spiritual consciousness.

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[3] Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1971), pp. 347-8

In this miracle of the human body, there are various *cakras* — centres of consciousness. Each *cakra* is the meeting point of the physical, mental and spiritual bodies of man. The lowest three are located in the region of the organ of evacuation, the organ of reproduction and the navel. These are connected with man's lower life, animal life, sensual life. The centre located in the region of the heart is the fourth and is called *anāhata cakra*; it lies between the lower three and the higher three centres. The heart and the higher three centres are connected with man's spiritual life. The three higher centres are in the region of the throat, in the region between the eyebrows, and in the head respectively. You should not understand these centres physiologically. These are all like gateways to different planes of spiritual consciousness.

According to the teachers of the Tantra, the *Kuṇḍalinī* or man's latent spiritual power, or you may say pure consciousness, which was originally located in the head centre or *sahasrāra*, passed down the spiritual channel called *suṣumnā* through various centres of consciousness and reached the base of the spine. There it forgot itself. It then came under the sway of ignorance, was dominated by desires and passions. It forgot the way to go back. The task in spiritual life is to recollect our true nature and raise our consciousness, from the lower centres to the higher centres. The heart being in between the lower and the higher centres is to be given preference. It is easy for us to practise our meditation there.

Importance of the heart centre

Again, the heart centre is important because that is where you first feel the light of the supreme Spirit, who dwells within us as the Soul of our soul. It is the special seat of the Personal God. For devotees of God the heart centre is naturally the best place to meditate. Sri Ramakrishna used to say:

> The soul through which God sports is endowed with His special power. The landlord may reside in any part of his estate, but he is generally to be found in a particular drawing room. The devotee is God's drawing room. God loves to sport in

> the heart of His devotee. It is there that His special power is manifest.[4]

Intellectual people find it easier to concentrate in the brain centre. But even for them it is better to begin with the heart centre. Everywhere in the Upaniṣads which mainly teach *jñāna*, we find the heart is mentioned as the main centre of consciousness:

> The all-pervading, all-knowing supreme Spirit whose glory is reflected in this universe is seated in the luminous space in the city of Brahman. He guides the mind and the Prāṇa, and is located in the heart. By realizing Him there the illumined souls attain immortality and supreme bliss.[5]

According to our spiritual teachers, the heart is the holy centre which is a special seat of the Paramātman. There He dwells in us as the Soul of our souls. Highly emotional people may for a time concentrate in the space between the two eyebrows or in the brain centre — to keep their emotions from falling to lower centres. But spiritual experiences begin with the heart centre.

The plane of consciousness corresponding to the heart is the plane where the devotee is blessed with visions of the personal aspects of God. He sees the 'inner light' and the luminous form of his *Iṣṭa Devatā* or Chosen Ideal. Such visions always bring with them also the conviction that he is a soul separate from the body. The devotee then realizes that he is a soul which has put on a pure mental body and a pure physical body and that the supreme Spirit too has assumed a blissful form for blessing him.

When the devotee succeeds in entering the heart centre, his body consciousness is forgotten, and at least for the time being he remains conscious of the luminous and blissful Presence of the Divine. This happens when, as a result of his spiritual practices, he develops the subtle sense which enables him to understand the significance of the heart centre. Then he understands the significance of meditating in the heart centre, and also what divine Presence really means.

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[4] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 263

[5] यः सर्वज्ञः सर्वविद् यस्यैष महिमा भुवि
दिव्ये ब्रह्मपुरे ह्येष व्योम्न्यात्मा प्रतिष्ठितः ।
मनोमयः प्राणशरीरनेता प्रतिष्ठितोऽन्ने हृदयं सन्निधाय
तद् विज्ञानेन परिपश्यन्ति धीरा आनन्दरूपममृतं यद् विभाति ॥
Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 2.2.7-8

Where is the heart centre?

When our spiritual consciousness awakens, we feel the eternal relation between the eternal soul and the eternal God. But where have people got the patience to make all these experiments themselves? They only come and ask questions. Many a time, after I had explained the significance of the heart centre and asked the devotees to do a little spiritual practice, they would come without doing that and ask: 'Now, where is the heart centre? Is it located on the right side or on the left side?' You have to discover that yourself. It is your heart, not mine. You have to find it out. This eternal question is there. The real task of the spiritual seeker is to develop this subtle inner sense. Without purity, chastity and intense spiritual hunger the heart centre remains unopened, undiscovered.

Here I am reminded of a story. There was a great discussion between an American doctor and a Chinese doctor in China. The American doctor said, 'According to our physiologists, the heart is on the left side.' The Chinese said, 'Our books say, the heart is on the right side.' And a simple discussion developed into a terrible verbal quarrel. Each one wanted to drown the other by his argument. Then an old wise Chinaman came. He asked, 'My boys, what is the matter? Why are you quarrelling like this?' The two doctors explained their problem. The old man smiled and said, 'My boys, what does it matter if the heart is to the right or to the left? Let the heart be at the right place!' So, we should discover the right place, forgetting the physiological heart, forgetting all theories.

According to many spiritual men, the heart is neither at the right nor at the left, but near about the middle of the chest, where we usually feel the reactions of our emotions — pleasant and unpleasant. But none of them mean the physiological heart. They mean, that in the middle of the body there is a region in which lies what they call *ākāśa* or space, or you may call it 'ether'. Meditation is to be performed in the *ākāśa* which exists in the heart, which fills it, and transcends it.

Now try to understand the meaning of the spiritual centre we call the heart. Try to feel a little consciousness there and then, with the help of a little reasoning, think, 'The little consciousness that is here is the consciousness that permeates the entire body.' Isn't it true? We touch any part of body. If it is not paralyzed, we feel the sensation. Similarly, this consciousness permeates our entire mental body. Mind is matter, subtle matter. It becomes active because of the touch of consciousness. This body of bones and flesh — all matter — appears to be alive with the touch of the Spirit.

Contact between the soul and God in the heart

The ancient *ṛṣi* declared:

> There is a pure, subtle, sinless seat, lotus-like in form, situated in the middle of the body. Within this lies the sorrowless, subtle *ākāśa*. Meditation is to be practised in this space.[6]

Think of the *ākāśa* or space in what you call the heart. The space that is here is a part of the space that penetrates and permeates our physical body and mental body. It is the seat of our Ātman or Self and that again is a part of the space which is everywhere, the Paramātman or Nārāyaṇa.

The word *ākāśa* has a deep meaning. The space that is in this room appears to be limited. But is it really limited? No, it cannot be. The space in the room is inseparable from the space outside it, the walls only appear to limit it. So also is the case with the Spirit that appears to be limited by the heart. What appears to be limited is inseparable from the Unlimited. That is what the Upaniṣadic teacher says in the section called 'Antaryāmi Brāhmaṇa,' in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. The infinite Spirit dwells in the earth, in the water, in the fire, in the sky, in the air, in the heaven, in the sun, in the moon, in the stars; He also dwells in the eye, the mind, the intellect, permeates everything. He is the Inner Controller and your own immortal Self.[7] But the spiritual seeker should actually realize all this through his meditation. It is not enough to talk about the Ātman. One should feel it, seek it, and finally experience it.

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[6] दह्रं विपापं परमेश्मभूतं यत् पुण्डरीकं पुरमध्यसंस्थम्।
तत्रापि दह्रं गगनं विशोकं तस्मिन् यदन्तस्तदुपासितव्यम्॥

Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad, 12.16

In the Vedāntic way of thinking, the individual and the Universal are inseparable. Just as we have a body and in the heart there is this *ākāśa*, so also there is *ākāśa* in the cosmic heart, if you may say so. The same *ākāśa* permeates our mental body and the cosmic body. The same Spirit permeates our individual soul and the universal Spirit. He is the One beyond all names, beyond all forms, who manifests Himself as the individual and the cosmic.

The text beginning with '*dahraṁ vipāpam*' has got many interpretations. But casting aside all philosophical disputations, we may safely accept that the individual soul dwells in the *ākāśa* in the heart and the supreme Spirit dwells in the soul as the Soul of all souls. All our teachers tell us that our individual consciousness is part of the cosmic Consciousness. The individual cannot exist independently. Can a bubble exist without the ocean? Can a little ray of light exist without an infinite light? Can the space that is here in the heart exist without the infinite space? No, the individual and the Universal are inseparable. We must realize the eternal contact between the individual and the Universal in the heart centre.

Think intensely of the heart centre and imagine it to be a centre of divine Consciousness. Have the thought that the divine Consciousness which is within you is also outside, part and parcel of an infinitude of Consciousness which is undivided and indivisible.

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[7] यः पृथिव्यां तिष्ठन् पृथिव्या अन्तरः, यं पृथिवी
न वेद यस्य पृथिवी शरीरम् यः पृथिवीमन्तरो
यमयति, एष त आत्मान्तर्याम्यमृतः ॥
योऽप्सु तिष्ठन् ... ॥
योऽग्नौ तिष्ठन् ... ॥

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.7.3-23

In the beginning you may think of this consciousness as light but, really speaking, what is meant is the light of intelligence, i.e. the divine Light; and this divine Light, which is in me, pervades at the same time the whole universe and is one and eternally indivisible. This body of ours is like a temple of Brahman. Remember always: each body is a temple of Brahman!

Having done all this, try to merge your consciousness in the divine Consciousness as in the case of the salt doll getting merged in the sea. You know the parable of Sri Ramakrishna about the salt doll.[8] Our body consciousness stands in the way, and as soon as we try to merge it in the divine Consciousness we get the idea that the soul is not the body.

In the beginning all this is just imagination, but remember it is imagination about the Real. It is not a vain imagination. If we sincerely persist in our spiritual practice, we will one day realize the Reality about which we have been imagining for a long time.

Now, let us sum up what we have discussed so far. *Dhyāna* (or meditation) is not just ordinary concentration. It is a special kind of concentration, which is the result of spiritual discipline, and moral virtues. It must have a spiritual content. It is done on a particular centre of consciousness. The heart is the best centre for all beginners. Finally, meditation means the union of the soul with God.

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[8] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* op. cit., p. 29

CHAPTER 21

SOME PRACTICAL HINTS ON MEDITATIVE LIFE

Find rest in meditation

Never say: 'Oh, my mind is so very restless. How is it possible for me to meditate?' Just because your mind is so very restless you must meditate all the more. A perfectly calm mind does not need so much meditation.

People sometimes try to find rest in doing nothing, in being just lazy but with their minds working, imagining all sorts of useless things. Real meditation is the best means of getting rest, relaxation and poise. Many people think they can get relaxation in all sorts of diversions and dirty amusements. Meditation and *japa* are natural ways of resting and filling the mind with new freshness. Through them the mind flows in a natural way towards the source of all energy namely, the Self, and then the mind and the body are refilled by this energy. All strength, all power, all poise come from the Divine. And meditation is a direct means of tapping this source.

If any day you feel too disturbed or tired to meditate, you can just sit down for a few minutes and pray intensely to the Divine. 'Thou art purity, fill Thou me with purity. Thou art energy, fill Thou me with energy. Thou art strength, fill Thou me with strength.'[1] This kind of prayer will calm the mind. The whole secret of poise, of calmness, of true human efficiency, is within us. Yet people seek it outside!

If, after a whole day's hard labour, you feel sleepy at night and naturally find it impossible to meditate, just take the divine Name thinking of the Lord for a short time and then go to sleep and get up refreshed in body and mind. A short nap often clears all fatigue. But do not make this an excuse for dozing off during meditation. Meditation in the regular way should be done after your sleep.

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[1] तेजोऽसि तेजो मयि धेहि। वीर्यमसि वीर्यं मयि धेहि।
बलमसि बलं मयि धेहि। ओजोऽसि ओजो मयि धेहि।
Śukla Yajur-Veda Saṁhitā, 19.9

Seek solitude within you

In the beginning of your spiritual life you should sit quietly in a solitary place for meditation. But you should also remember that you cannot enjoy solitude merely by going to a forest or a cave. External solitude can help you only if you are able to remain calm internally also. Real silence is the silence of the mind. It is stilling the mind and freeing it from all unwelcome thoughts. First attain the thought of the Divine, and then try to eliminate all other thoughts that cannot be directly connected with the divine thought. 'Mere external solitude will not make one forget the world, and that alone is real solitude which makes one forget the world, and that alone is real solitude in which one merges oneself in Brahman.' When you sit for meditation, erase all ideas of the world in your mind and think of the Lord alone.

Follow a definite routine

Everything must be clear and definite in spiritual life. The first thing to be done by every aspirant is to fix a definite routine and stick to it at all costs. Some people are afraid that such a rigid regimen will make their life mechanical. That is not true. The beginner especially cannot afford to do without a definite routine. That is the only way to discipline a wayward will. We should plan our waking hours — how to discharge our daily duties, what to do with the spare time, what thoughts we should have, etc. The life of a spiritual aspirant must be conscious and alert. Minimize your unconscious thinking and activities. Be more and more wide-awake.

Habits are to be formed and strengthened. Then spiritual life becomes easier and loses much of its initial strain. Strictly preserve your fixed hours. Then meditation becomes possible even when the mind is very restless. There should be perfect regularity in the hours of your spiritual practice, because only thus does the mind grow accustomed to it. And under all circumstances a certain minimum is to be kept up regarding one's daily *japa* and meditation. Don't breakfast in the morning until you have finished a fixed minimum of *japa*. The duration of spiritual practice should be slowly and steadily increased in the case of a beginner. In the case of an advanced aspirant, there will be an undercurrent of devotion in the mind which enables him to keep a part of the mind busy with devotional practices at all times, whatever he may happen to do outwardly. Before that state is reached, the greatest regularity concerning the hours and method of spiritual exercises is to be observed by all aspirants most scrupulously.

We are not yet sensitive enough. We do not yet clearly recognize our own motives. Sometimes we allow our mind to find nice plausible explanations for our actions and thoughts, and to deceive us. Tell your mind: 'Let me see if you break down', if it complains against the great strain of spiritual practices. If we try to lead the higher life, we should not mind even if we die in the attempt. And the mind will go on revolting and complaining for a long time. It will say, 'Look here, today you have had very little sleep. This may be bad for your nerves. Take care that you do not have a nervous breakdown. Stop your practices for a day or two.' Just give your mind some good kicks in such a case, whip it nicely, be very hard with this bad mind. Just as a horse gets whipped by its rider when it does not move, so you give your mind a good thrashing if it revolts.

If we are not prepared to find time for our daily spiritual practice, we can never progress. Many people never seem to have realized this fact at all. We must minimize all unnecessary waste of time in futile thinking, gossiping, aimless activities, wandering, etc. Then we will get plenty of time for our spiritual practice. With a few minutes of random meditation a day nothing can be achieved. Time is to be saved as much as possible, and we should never spend too much physical energy in unnecessary occupations. At present there is too much useless waste of physical energy, too much mental restlessness. Whirlpools everywhere. Break the whirlpools if you want to find the right mood for intense spiritual practice.

Improve the quality of your meditation

Learn to intensify your meditation. Pay more attention to quality than to quantity. For people who are very busy, there is no other way. Whatever time you set apart for meditation should be properly utilized. Increase your power of concentration. In the same way you must increase the quality of your studies. When you read a book do it with concentration and a definite purpose.

Absent-mindedness during meditation is not only a sheer waste of time; it is a sure sign of lack of spiritual fervour. Many people in the name of meditation go on thinking about worldly things. If you find the mind becoming very Tāmasic (dull) or Rājasic (restless), you should get up from your seat, read some elevating passage, and when the proper spiritual mood returns, sit down again. Sleep and meditation should never be combined. At the time of meditation the mind should never be allowed to enter a drowsy state. For many people meditation seems to be an invitation to sleep! This later on becomes a bad habit.

Auspicious days

In order to repeat the name of God or meditate on Him you don't have to consult the calendar or the almanac. Every day is an auspicious day to think about God. Every day takes us nearer to death. So one day not spent in thinking of the Lord is one day wasted. According to Hindu tradition a few days after a birth or a death in the family are considered to be inauspicious for religious observances. But that applies only to external rituals, *not* to *japa* and meditation. Spiritual practice should be continued on all days and under all circumstances.

Some people have great faith in astrology. In Bengal late evenings are said to be inauspicious. When I first went to Madras in 1911, I found that the *rāhukālam*[2] was mostly in the morning. For those who are lazy this means that practically the whole day is inauspicious!

Once in August 1929, I went to Belur Math on some work. Mahapurush Maharaj (Swami Shivananda) was then the President of the Order. He was very much interested in the work at Madras. Whenever I went to Belur Math he used to ask me to go back to Madras soon so that the Mission's work there might not suffer. But this time I wanted to stay at Belur Math for a little longer. So when Mahapurush Maharaj as usual asked me when I was going back, I told him that the following few days were inauspicious. Actually I did not care either for auspiciousness or inauspiciousness. It was only an excuse for remaining in the spiritual atmosphere of Belur Math a few days more. Mahapurush Maharaj's advice to me on this occasion should be an eye-opener to all of us.

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[2] Time interval in a day, considered by Hindus inauspicious for any undertaking.

> Mahapurushji: . . . But you are men of action. It won't do for you to look for auspicious days. Those who have nothing to do can afford to consult the almanac at every step. The Master also used to say, 'Only those who believe in such things are affected by them; others are not.' Besides, you are devotees of the Mother. She is protecting you under all conditions and will always do so. If one takes the name of the Lord and starts on a journey, one will not come to grief. By the strength of His name even distress is transformed into a blessing.

Saying this he sang:

> Whoever starts upon a journey taking
>   the name of Mother Durgā,
> Śiva with His almighty trident,
>   surely will protect him.

In a couplet composed by Tulsīdās there is the same idea:

> Every phase of the moon is auspicious;
>   every day an auspicious day.
> An inauspicious day affects him only
>   who has forgotten the Lord.

The day one takes the name of the Lord whole-heartedly is a good day![3]

In 1933 when I boarded the ship on my first voyage to the

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[3] *For Seekers of God,* trans. Swami Vividishananda & Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1975), p. 84

West, I did not bother about finding whether it was an auspicious day or not. Everything went well with me. I went with the idea that I was going for the Lord's work. If the mind is pure, there is no need to consult an almanac. If you start repeating the Lord's name, every time is an auspicious one. When I was in Europe many people wanted to study my palm and horoscope. I never had a horoscope. One devotee asked me, 'Swami, don't you believe in the influence of stars and planets?' I replied: 'I am in the hands of a Power that controls the stars and the planets.'

On the birthdays of great souls, we should devote more time to recollection and meditation and prayer and avoid outer distractions all the more. They should not be merely days of outward festivity and social rejoicing, but also of quiet withdrawal into our own innermost soul, where we can contact them if we are able to reach their plane of consciousness. Do not think these great ones are gone. No. They exist now just as they existed in their lifetime. Everybody who is sincere and learns how to raise his consciousness above the physical plane and how to fix it on the great ones and their ideal, can come in touch with them and be in their company. Do not think Christ lived only two thousand years ago. Do not think Buddha is dead and gone. They are immortal. Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda are still alive. Their living power continues to guide and mould the destinies of thousands of people.

Time for meditation

Try to practise meditation four times a day, as Swami Brahmananda has advised us — at dawn, midday, dusk and midnight. At these points of time nature becomes peaceful and there is also a change in the flow of spiritual vibrations inside and outside us. Those who cannot meditate at all these times should at least stick to the morning and evening hours.

How many times do we eat in a day? If we can find enough time for physical food, should we not also try to make time for spiritual food, which is absolutely necessary for a healthy mind? When we are hungry we run and snatch some food. We must feel hungry for spiritual food also. Then we will not complain about lack of time.

Morning is the best time for meditation. The night's sleep will have erased or quietened many of our memories and it is easier for us to concentrate then. As soon as you wake up, salute the Lord and repeat His holy Name. Fill your mind with the *mantra* and the holy Image before you think about worldly affairs. Never allow the mind to dwell on worldly things as soon as you get up from bed. The conscious mind is then not active and the unconscious mind is more receptive. So whatever suggestions you give to your mind at that time sinks down deep into the unconscious. The small hours of the morning just before dawn are the most precious for spiritual aspirants and should be fully utilized for *japa* and meditation.

It is good to sit for a while on the seat after finishing your meditation. We should sit quietly thinking about the object of our meditation in a relaxed way. Then our mind will be filled with fresh spiritual thoughts and we will feel a higher joy. Where does this joy come from? It comes from the deeper layers of the mind. This is *bhajanānanda*, the joy derived from worship or meditation. We will then be at peace with ourselves and with the world. We may then recite some prayers and hymns along similar lines in order to intensify and stabilize the meditative mood and inner joy. Even after leaving the seat we should not immediately talk with anyone but should rather be contemplative and remain self-possessed. Practice like this fosters a continuous undercurrent of meditation, helping us to keep our mind on a high level.

This after-meditation sitting should be brief. If you meditate for fifteen minutes should you go on sitting there for three-fourths of an hour? If you meditate for an hour or an hour and a half, you may continue to sit for another fifteen minutes or so to protect your spiritual mood from a sudden invasion of worldly thoughts. That is what Swami Brahmananda advised us to do.

Instructions regarding sleep

Five to six hours' sleep is enough for the spiritual aspirant.

Eight hours are generally too much. Sleep as such is not so much necessary as the conscious minimizing of our nervous and mental tensions at all times of the day. In order to be able to meditate, we should be able to relax, we should first learn how to decrease the tension of our nerves. Very nervous people can never meditate. After that, we should control our sentiments and feelings, even if they be good and pure or elevating. By developing the spirit of self-surrender we should be able to make the mind passive, attuned to the infinite, and thereby minimize all anxiety and our terrible nervous and mental tensions. If we are able to do this, we will feel a sort of peace, even long before being really able to meditate. We should make it a point to relax as much as possible before attempting meditation.

We should have a short break after lunch, say at two o'clock or so. Even a short 'cat-nap' refreshes the mind greatly. This is very useful, but very difficult for many people to practice. For many it is difficult to have just a little break in the hectic and feverish activities of their mind and fill it again with the holy Image and the harmonizing vibrations of the holy sound.

We should also make it a point never to read anything worldly — novels, fiction, or stories — before going to bed or before falling asleep. At that time we ought to have some holy thought and some holy sound to dwell on. Think that you are going to sleep in the lap of God, or your soul like a point of light is getting merged in the ocean of divine Light, or some such idea. The Divine should fill our whole mind before we fall asleep. If we permit ourselves to read something worldly, this goes on working in our unconscious mind during the hours of our sleep and will produce very bad effects. In the evening we should be very careful about what we allow our mind to busy itself with. There should be a concentrated and peaceful dwelling on the Divine — either the divine Form or the divine Name or both — which is the most efficacious way. Only thus can we gradually succeed in transforming the contents of our subconscious mind. It is very harmful to read worldly books before falling asleep, but we generally do not realize the extent of the harm we do to ourselves by being careless in this respect. The workings of the unconscious mind during the time of our sleep are very important and should not be lost sight of.

If you find it difficult to remember the Lord as soon as you wake up in the morning and also before you go to bed, keep a picture of Him nearby, and make it a point to look at it when you switch off your light and again when you wake up in the morning. If you practise this habit of looking at His picture, you will soon find it difficult to go to bed or wake up without thinking about him.

There is one more point which should be mentioned; if you wake up at night, at once begin doing your *japa* in a quiet, peaceful way, without any unnecessary strain. But during the time of your practice, *japa* and sleep should never get connected. That is very bad. Before going to bed do 100 to 1000 times *japa*; fill yourself with the holy sound and make it a point never to stop doing *japa* before having reached the number you intended to do.

Have a fixed centre of consciousness

You must have a fixed centre of consciousness. You can find it only by seeking the source of your 'I'-consciousness or by trying to seek contact with the Divine. Hold on to this centre of consciousness always. Never choose a centre lower than the heart. Never try to concentrate the mind on the lower centres, even though some Tāntric books prescribe it. For the beginner concentration at the lower centres could lead to the rousing of sex and other passions.

Control of food

A spiritual aspirant must at no time overload his stomach with food. Food must be given its proper place in spiritual life. It should not become a sort of obsession. Fix the quantity and type of food that suits your needs. Fasting once in a fortnight or so is good but it is better to exercise moderation always. Fasting does not suit certain body constitutions. Such people should avoid the temptation to fast. There are some people who go on trying to fast and failing in it. They are always worried about it. Instead of thinking about God always, a lot of time and energy is wasted in these needless struggles.

Posture

Regarding *āsana* (posture) you should have two different ones, so that you can change the one for the other when you feel the strain. The central theme of *sādhanā* is meditation, and everything else is but a preparation for the mind to have the right mood. When the right mood comes, meditation becomes very easy. In India there is now a revival of practising the different *āsanas*. All these postures are not necessary for spiritual life. What is more important is that we should feel stable, relaxed and comfortable, with the body and head erect. This becomes easy and natural only after sufficient practice.

Rhythmic breathing

Practice of *prāṇāyāma* is dangerous in the case of the majority of people who can neither follow a regulated, quiet life nor be under the constant guidance of a qualified teacher. But there is no harm in practising regulated breathing without holding the breath. At first one may practise it at definite times. Later on, one can do it at other times also. Try to practise rhythmic breathing always, until it becomes a habit. Irregular breath is a tremendous waste of energy, and at the same time, it makes the mind restless. The senses must be subdued, the mind must be made rhythmic, the wheels of the whole body-machine must come under your control. And then you enjoy operating the machine.

Need for constant alertness

Learn to become fully conscious under all circumstances and in all situations of life, and learn to recognize your own true motives in every undertaking. Criticize yourself severely, but this criticism must always be constructive, and never merely destructive, if it is to help you in your spiritual striving and evolution. The negative attitude 'I am a sinner' only makes you a sinner all the more, and takes away from you all spiritual initiative.

Habit is formed through repeated actions. By changing the actions habits can be changed. Habit is only our second nature, not an essential part of our being. So, through steady practice even the worst habit can be changed. The older the habit the more difficult it is to overcome it. But one should not feel depressed if a bad habit persists even after repeated attempts to change it. If one keeps oneself watchful and alert over the workings of one's unconscious mind and sticks to a strict regimen of spiritual disciplines, all wrong habits will soon dwindle and disappear. But there must be perseverance and patience. Where there is a will, there is a way. See that you do not cultivate new bad habits. The old habits are troublesome enough.

The strength of a chain is to be judged by the strength of its weakest link, and so our capacity to stand evil company or association is to be judged by our response to it during our weakest moments. We should therefore be on our guard, trying to protect ourselves as much as possible from evil influences, and should also put forth every effort to strengthen the weakest links in our character through right thinking and conduct, through self-analysis, prayer and meditation.

If we are really watchful and try to lead the life of a sincere aspirant, we will be able to notice all the movements of our mind, all the thoughts and impulses that rise in it. Ordinarily we are so dull and careless about all this that we become aware of the perilous state we are in, only after the horse of our mind has thrown us into the ditch. But before reaching it, it had gone all the way to the ditch quite unperceived because of our carelessness and lack of right striving.

Hold the reins tight! All accidents on the path are due to carelessness. So be on your guard. Be always careful. Never leave your mind unwatched, not even for a single minute. This is the general rule for all aspirants, whatever the path they may follow.

Adjustment with your environment

Create a spiritual atmosphere wherever you are. Convert your room into a shrine. When you visit a holy place or a monastery it is not enough you enjoy its holy atmosphere. You must also contribute something to it. In the West the whole spiritual atmosphere has been depleted. The same thing may happen in India also if we don't learn to contribute something to it. Buildings and pictures are not enough. Very often, these come at the expense of spirituality.

It is no use grumbling about the environment. The world cannot change for you; you have to change yourself. You have to tune yourself properly and come in contact with the vast Presence, the higher Reality. During the period of spiritual practice we should think only of God and ourselves. We should forget everything else. Let us not worry too much about anything other than God. We should live with the Divine alone. This, it is true, is not the ultimate stage to be reached, but it is a very necessary stepping-stone to its attainment. Ultimately, we must realize the same divine Being in all, love all because of Him, for Him and through Him only.

Cultivate a definite attitude towards the Divine

A spiritual aspirant must cultivate a definite attitude or relationship with the Divine. To begin with, he must love a particular aspect of God, or a holy Personality, intensely. Then he must learn to see the cosmic Being at the back of the Personal God, and then he should see the Absolute at the back of the Cosmic. The holy Personality, the Incarnation or the Personal God, should take us, step by step, to the highest knowledge. The realization of the Absolute, the Transcendental, proceeds always through the realization of the Immanent Divine Principle. No one can take a long jump and reach the Absolute without the necessary preparation, however great may be its appeal to the intellect. The more we succeed in creating within ourselves a cosmic outlook, the more we feel that there is neither man nor woman, neither subject nor object, but that all is the One manifesting Itself through different names and forms.

We must learn to see God alone even in all awful, terrible things, without ever allowing the awful, the terrible, to overpower our mind. He is even in all gross, impure, awful, and vulgar things, but these manifestations must never be permitted to affect our mind or to take possession of it. Unless we develop the cosmic perspective we cannot attain balance and calmness of mind.

To the extent we succeed in seeing the One alone, to that extent we forget all limitations and pairs of opposites, we forget the whole play of the phenomenal world. And we can do this if we see that everything else but God is insignificant and fleeting, of secondary importance, a mere shadow, an unsubstantial passing show. Unless we are able to rid ourselves of the temptations presented to our mind by the senses, and unless we are able to achieve the control of this unruly mind, it is not possible to truly turn to the Divine and make Him the pivot of our life.

Learn to see things as they are. Everywhere on the phenomenal plane you find filth and flowers side by side. They are eternally inseparable so long as we do not go beyond the plane of manifestation, the plane of the pairs of opposites. During the early period of your *sādhanā* create a disgust for the world and its pleasures. Later on you can overcome this disgust and look upon the world through spiritual eyes.

Learn to manipulate your own mind

You must learn to touch the mind at the right point. You cannot get milk from the cow if you do not know how to milk it. You must become expert milkers if you want to get the greatest quantity of milk. In the same way, unless you know how to manipulate your own mind, you cannot get much benefit from it, even though you may have filled it with so many good ideas by reading books. Instead of milk you may get only some good kicks.

The mind has many compartments. Some of them you must lock up carefully; that is, bad impulses and memories must be checked. The others must be opened, that is, the tendency to practise detachment, devotion, etc. must be encouraged. But finally you must set fire to all the compartments, for Truth is beyond both bad and good.

Turn to God alone always

Let every prick, every blow, every kick we get in the world force us towards the Divine, and remind us of the unreality of the world. Thereby all our disappointments, all our miseries become blessings. If you have any burden, bring in the divine current and ventilate the whole atmosphere. It is good sometimes to let out steam when a large quantity of it has accumulated, but let even that be only towards the Divine. You can scold Him as your friend, your play-fellow, your comrade, if you want to. He is so near you if you really know how to get in touch with Him. And He is not at all offended if you speak freely to Him. You see, one great and very important task in spiritual life is to establish an intimate relationship with the Divine.

A spiritual aspirant should depend on God alone under all circumstances. In the beginning he may take the help of men and institutions, but he should in due course learn to draw his inspiration more and more from the Divine.

When we feel miserable, the whole mind is upset. But even when we feel great pain, we should say, 'Yes, my mind and body are feeling these, but my Self cannot be touched by them, my Self cannot be imprisoned by them.' Always, at all times, assert the glory, the freedom of your soul. When men of realization feel miserable, they just stand as the witness. They can at once give a higher turn to their mind and remain unaffected under all circumstances.

Our ability to feel the indwelling Spirit in our own hearts is to be strengthened. Let all our thoughts and feelings be directed towards this divine Consciousness that is within us. Become aware of it! In the outside world there is so much misery, so much frustration, so much distress and pain. And it will always be like that. The phenomenal world cannot exist without the pairs of opposites. So there will always be good and evil, misery and pain: never will there be unchanging happiness. This situation can never be changed. All that you can do is to cling to the Lord all the more and develop a spirit of genuine self-surrender to Him. This is the only way to peace and blessedness. It is not an escape, but an actual heightening of all your faculties of perception and feeling. It is a practical solution. All these outside troubles you are constantly complaining about, all these tensions in the world that are likely to lead to battles and world wars, should force us to seek God who alone is the repository of peace. Let all our miseries and our troubles and disappointments constantly remind us of the ephemeral nature of the world. There is nothing in this world that will give us security. Let us not expect any pleasure, any happiness from the world. God is the only source of strength to us. Let His will be done. Let us become united with Him. This should be the attitude of a genuine spiritual aspirant.

Need for simplicity

Be straightforward in all your dealings. Give up hypocrisy and conceit. Be child-like, not childish. But be reserved and aloof in the company of worldly people, in a dignified way without being haughty. You can be full of sympathy for others in an impersonal way and yet be aloof and reserved, and not allow them to come near you in a personal way.

Everything becomes simple the moment we become simple. We should live like angels, like true children of God. We should learn to combine the simplicity and purity of a child with the maturity and wisdom of a grown-up man.

You should not open your heart to all, but should open it to pure and spiritual souls. There is no need to wash your dirty linen in public. Bad people take advantage of your confessions and turn them against you to make your life miserable. But you can always open your heart to a wise elder, to one who is already well established in the spiritual path and has experienced its difficulties himself. You should never open it to wrong and worldly people. Turn to your *Iṣṭam* when you are in difficulties if there is no one who is experienced to turn to. Worldly people cannot give you advice at all. One of the great causes of sorrow is to listen to the advice of fools.

They do not know themselves, so how can they help you? Even if they are well-intentioned, they cannot give you any sound advice about spiritual matters which affect your whole life. Another sense is needed for that, which the worldly-minded do not possess. Their mirrors are too dirty to reflect the light, or if they reflect it at all, the picture is so blurred and distorted, that only confusion can be the result.

First be a true gentleman

This is a very important point: Before you can become a spiritual man or woman, you must become a gentleman or a gentlewoman, in the real sense of the term. Only gentlemen and gentlewomen can become spiritual men and women. I always tell people again and again: before becoming a devotee, before even thinking of taking up spiritual life, see that you become a gentleman or a gentlewoman. And the devotee is able to be a gentleman or a gentlewoman when he or she is established, at least to some extent, in the preliminary practices leading to spiritual life. Sometimes we find people behaving in a most undignified, uncultured way. Very often grown-up people behave like children. Childhood must be outgrown. Sometimes people remain ill-mannered and undignified all their life, because they are not able to have the right adjustment, the right attitude. It is the after-effect of a faulty childhood. It is the result of stunted growth. I often advise people to read Dale Carnegie's books, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living,* before they begin spiritual life. Many of our problems have nothing to do with spiritual life; they are just problems caused by our wrong attitudes and conduct.

It is not enough that strangers know that we are good, but we should also see that those who are near us know us to be good and perfectly controlled. It is very easy to show a nice smiling face to strangers. We should always value the opinion of those near us more than that of others whom we only see once in a while.

Learn to be patient

Intolerance and bigotry only show that the person has never had any spiritual experience or even firm faith. That is the attitude of an atheist who clings desperately to some dogma because, deep within him, he is unable to conquer his own doubts consciously. Those who have true faith are sympathetic towards all, and do not feel jealous of other pious and sincere souls. Religious swashbuckling is a sure sign of religious hyprocrisy.

A spiritual aspirant must learn to be patient and forbearing under all circumstances. Things do not take shape according to our wish. Unpleasant and unfavourable situations have to be faced. You cannot expect to have favourable conditions for meditation always, especially in modern cities. Learn to make the best use of the time and the environment you find yourself in. We must learn to live in harmony with the environment.

The cause of anger lies in the disharmony within. A man first becomes angry with himself before he becomes angry with others. Hating oneself is as bad as hating others. It is the root-cause of so many problems as modern psychologists have shown.

The channels connecting the soul with the Divine often get clogged. These must be cleared. Otherwise it will lead to disharmony within and troubles with others. Those who are in tune with the Divine are always in harmony.

Don't be restless. Apart from physical and mental restlessness, there is a kind of subconscious restlessness. The person himself may not be aware of it. Such unconscious restlessness drains away a lot of energy.

Stop complaining

People often complain that they have not achieved anything even after long years of spiritual practice. If we analyze their minds, we will know that almost all the time they think on these lines: 'I pray and do *japa* but there is no result.' Now, instead of spending energy on such thinking, if they had concentrated their minds on God, it would have been far more useful. Thinking constantly of this 'I' we become egocentric. We think we alone are devotees. Devotees should really be very careful in this. If they do not root out this 'I'-consciousness in the initial stages, it will be very difficult to do so later. That is why the Holy Mother said, it is egotism to try to judge one's own spiritual progress. Leave the fruit of your *sādhanā* to God; offer everything you do to Him.

Connect all your work with the Divine in some way or other. Do everything for Him. Do all the duties of life that you are expected to do. But the central thought should be about God. Great results will come to you if you stick to this practice. There is no miracle or magic in spiritual life. It is very simple but difficult.

Go on repeating the name of God, the *mantra* you have been given by your *guru*. You may repeat it loudly when you are alone. The best method is mental repetition and listening to it. Fill your whole mind with its vibrations. The divine Name has great power but it is potential. Constant practice will make this power manifest itself. Constant repetition will drive the *mantra* into deeper layers of the mind where it will work to prevent the rising of bad thoughts. You can see for yourself the great effects of a thorough-going practice of constant *japa*.

Don't create unnecessary discontentment. Some people seem to thrive on tension. When they have nothing to worry about they create some new ones. Then they brood over them and increase them. The monkey has an itch. It scratches. Then there is a small wound. It goes on scratching. It makes the wound a big ulcer. Is not our case similar to this? We magnify our troubles out of all proportion by brooding over them. Instead of that why not go on brooding over the Lord?

Sorrow and suffering cannot be avoided in life. Every man has his share of these. If some people are happy it is because they have learned to outgrow these. Some people feel like committing suicide. Does it solve their problems? The problems can only be shifted to another plane because the soul continues to exist even after the body is destroyed. It has to face the problems all the same. Ending one's life in an unnatural way means loss of so much of valuable time, valuable opportunities to learn and improve oneself. So it is better to give up such stupid thoughts.

Sometimes the mind is in a good mood. That is because of a preponderance of *sattva guṇa* in it. But this is not permanent. The *guṇas* are constantly changing; that is the law of nature. So sometimes *rajas* and *tamas* predominate in your mind; you may then feel restless or perfectly dull. All this is unavoidable. But by repeating God's name and leading a moral life you favour the rise of *sattva* in you; then you feel happy and peaceful. By practice this mood can be made more lasting and stable.

Establish harmony — inner and outer

Unless the spiritual ideal is very strong, the mind is likely to be blank. Repeat the divine Name and remember the Lord. That will remove the negative mood.

We have our temperament and affinities. That is the reason why we cannot feel free with everybody. That is natural. But it is also possible to rise above this nature as we evolve spiritually.

The greatest obstacles to meditation are our own mental impurities, desires and passions, tendencies and impressions based on our clinging to our and other personalities. The remedy is to awaken our spiritual consciousness and think that we are the Ātman — manifestation of the Paramātman.

The subtle body interpenetrates the physical body and also permeates it. It is both inside and outside it. Similarly the Ātman — individual consciousness — is both inside and outside the subtle and physical bodies. The Infinite Spirit interpenetrates and permeates all beings and things. The *cakra* is a point of contact of the physical and subtle bodies, and of the soul and the Paramātman. As we move from the physical to the subtle and then to the soul, the figure appears to be like this:

Soul or causal body — innermost
Subtle body — intermediate
Physical body — outermost

But in reality it is like this:

Soul or *kāraṇaśarīra* — outermost
Subtle body — intermediate
Physical body — innermost

The soul and more so, the Paramātman is subtler than the subtlest and vaster than the vastest — *aṇoraṇīyān mahato mahīyān*. So what is *aṇu* (subtle) is also *mahat* (vast).

Meditating on the embodiment of *Sat-Cit-Ānanda,* be one with It and share the divine Love and Bliss with everybody.

That is how our life is to be made fuller, sweeter, a blessing to ourselves as well as to others. First of all bring about a transformation in your own life at least to some extent through regular *sādhanā* and then take up the ideal of 'work and worship'. Only you should take care that you do not take up more work than you can joyfully do. Pray to the indwelling Spirit for Light and guidance.

I know only one way of finding peace and that is through spiritual practices — prayer and meditation; that is what I can suggest to everyone of you.

The restlessness and emptiness that an aspirant feels can be removed only through contacting the divine Spirit — who is the Soul of our soul and the Soul of all beings. This communion is attained in due course by following the spiritual path — by consecrated action and loving devotion to the supreme Spirit.

If spiritual life does not make devotees considerate and kind to others, then what is the use of such a life? We should all remember the characteristics of the ideal *bhakta* described by Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā* and try to follow in His footsteps:

> He who hates no creature and is friendly and compassionate towards all, who is free from the feelings of 'I' and 'Mine' and remains even-minded in pain and pleasure; who is forbearing, ever content and steady in meditation; who is self-controlled, possessed of firm conviction and has mind and intellect fixed on Me — he who is thus devoted to Me, is dear to Me.[4]

Take care that you don't tax your brain too much and loosen any screw! Regular practice alone can give us concentration. And, in the beginning, this is to be done whether the mind is in the proper mood or not. Don't worry if the mind is restless. To the extent the theme for meditation becomes more interesting than anything else, the mind would love to dwell on it. Such is the power of the divine Name that along with meditation it produces harmony in the body and the mind and also quickens right understanding and creates greater interest in spiritual theme.

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[4] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 12.13,14

We should all bear in mind that those who really and truly follow the spiritual path, are less egocentric and more selfless, kind and considerate towards others. We have to be givers and not beggars. The more we succeed in doing this, the more we feel free, joyous and peaceful.

It is enough if you regard Him as your 'all in all'. To me He is the Soul of my soul and also everything else. I do not want to cling to my personality or form and even to the form of my *Iṣṭa Devatā*, but I try to feel that I am a soul ever in tune with the Soul of my soul, with the Soul of all souls. It is this infinite Spirit that takes the form of the *Iṣṭa Devatā*. Realize this through *japa* and meditate on His blessed Form.

We need not be too rigid in our timings and duration of spiritual practice. Let us do what all we can, being relaxed in body and mind, but always taking care not to be cheated by the lower mind.

Instead of doing *japa* and meditation for hours together, it is better to have breaks with study or even doing a little useful physical work.

It is only when we get a glimpse of the Infinite that we shall be able to understand something of the glory of the Divine Personality. What does one know of the wave unless one knows something of the ocean? How can one comprehend a limited space without an idea of the infinite space or a ray of light without some knowledge of the infinite light?

The procedure for meditation is this: think that your heart is filled with the light of your soul which permeates your mind and body, both inside and outside, and next think that it is a part of the luminous infinite Spirit which shines everywhere. Merging your body, mind and the whole world into it, think that you are a little sphere of light, part of the infinite Spirit.

This formless meditation may not appeal to you, and even if it does, it is difficult to do it for long. So think that your soul puts on a pure mental body and a pure physical body, and that the Paramātman takes the form of your *Iṣṭa Devatā*. Repeat the *mantra* of your *Iṣṭam* and meditate on His luminous form. Think that He who manifests Himself as your *Iṣṭa Devatā* is none other than the infinite Spirit shining everywhere.

CHAPTER 22

PLACE OF PRAYER IN SPIRITUAL LIFE

Prayer — worldly and spiritual

A parish priest asked a little boy: 'Do you say your prayers every night?' 'No Sir', replied the boy. 'Some nights I don't want anything.' To a child prayer means asking God for various things of the world. Just as he asks his daddy or mummy he asks God also for various things. This child's concept of prayer is often carried over to adulthood. People look upon God as a great boon-giver. They go on asking Him for this and that, and if these prayers are not 'answered', they doubt His very existence. Now this terrible War* is going on. People in the warring countries — Germany, Italy, England, America — are praying for the success of their countries. Even the churches are divided and the priests and ministers are praying to God to side with their countries. What have these people taken God for? A tyrant up in the sky, cruel and partial to the people below, and playing with their instincts of greed and hatred?

Philo Judaeus, the Jewish philosopher of Alexandria of the first century A.D., held the view that God was perfect purity, the source of all good, and that matter was the source of evil. Man's goal was to return to God and perfect goodness. This view is prominent in the theological Christianity. The forces of evil are personified in Satan. This dualism of personified good and evil originally came from Zoroastrianism. According to Christian view Christ overcame evil.

According to Hinduism, God is beyond good and evil which belong to the plane of Māyā. God is Absolute Consciousness and Bliss; He is infinite Existence. Creation and destruction, good and evil, are only two different aspects of the same energy called Māyā-Śakti. The play of these forces depends upon the inherent tendencies of human beings. In man there are two tendencies — *vidyā* and *avidyā. Vidyā* manifests itself as purity, detachment, love for God and wisdom. *Avidyā* manifests itself as delusion, cruelty, selfishness, sensuality, etc. These tendencies exist in relation to man's soul and are the accumulated result of his repeated births. Here is man's responsibility. He can choose the path of *vidyā* called *dharma* and approach God more and more and finally, through God's grace, go beyond both good and evil. Or he can choose the path of *avidyā* or *adharma* and, going away from God, heap on himself more and more misery. Though God is beyond both good and evil, He manifests Himself as man — as the divine Incarnation — for the sake of humanity. An Incarnation of God shows mankind the path of spiritual endeavour, often a new path, which will lead man back to his real abode and essence, the Absolute.

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* The Second World War. This talk was given in 1944 at Philadelphia.

God is the indwelling witness in all beings. Spiritual life is the discovery of this Soul of all souls. Prayer is a means for this discovery. Prayer takes us nearer to God. It awakens our inherent spiritual powers. God listens to our prayer, but as Sri Ramakrishna has repeatedly said, the prayer must be sincere. The mind and the heart must be made one in prayer. God responds to our prayer in a way which is for our own good. Very often people do not know what is good for them. It is therefore only good that so many of their selfish worldly prayers are not 'answered' at all. If God were to fulfil every wish of everybody, the world will be in chaos and every surviving man will be mad. A little girl added a postscript to her usual prayer at night: 'Please send the beautiful snow to keep the flowers warm in winter.' Then she confided to her mother: 'That's the time I fooled Him. I wanted snow so that I could go sledging.' God cannot be fooled that way through our prayers.

Faith is the most essential thing in prayer. In order that prayer should be effective it must be based on the fact that God is one's sole refuge under all circumstances. Two men were adrift on the sea in an open boat. One of them who was a heavy drinker prayed: 'O Lord, save me and I will never drink again.' 'Wait a moment', advised his companion. 'Don't go too far. I think I see a ship coming.' That is how many people think when they pray.

People pray out of fear or anxiety or worry. The primitive man prays to the various forces of nature to protect him. The Zulu worshipper threatens God: 'Hear me or you will feed on nettles!' The spiritual man prays out of the depths of his heart. His prayer is an expression of the longing of the soul for freedom. The true devotee while praying resigns himself to God's will. It is a prayer for true light. The ancient Hindu prayer called the Gāyatrī, repeated even today by millions of Hindus, is one of the most sublime prayers. 'Let us meditate on the supreme glory of the divine Being who illumines the three worlds. May He awaken spiritual intuition in us.'[1] The highest form of prayer is meditation (*dhyāna*) when the mind flows to God in deep silence.

When Swami Vivekananda was in his adolescence, his father suddenly died leaving him to support his mother, several children and relatives. All his efforts to secure a decent source of support for the family failed, and out of his distress he approached his beloved Master Sri Ramakrishna, and requested him to pray for him. But the Master who was the embodiment of renunciation told the boy: 'Go to the Divine Mother in the temple and pray to Her yourself. She will surely listen to you.' When young Vivekananda stood before the Mother, he saw Her divine splendour and felt Her living presence. He totally forgot everything about his family and worldly affairs and repeatedly prayed to Her only for devotion and spiritual knowledge. He remembered his 'mistake' only after returning to the Master who sent him back to the Divine Mother once again. But, again, Vivekananda could only pray for knowledge and devotion. This happened several times. At last the Master took pity on him and blessed him that the members of his family would not lack the bare necessities of life.[2]

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[1] तत् सवितुर्वरेण्यं भर्गो देवस्य धीमहि ।
घियो यो नः प्रचोदयात् ॥
Ṛg-Veda, 3.62.10

This is a lesson for all of us. Let us pray only for devotion, strength and purity. That is spiritual prayer. It can take several forms. But all aim at taking the soul nearer to God. Spiritual prayer is the first step towards true meditation (*dhyāna*).

Forms of spiritual prayer in Hinduism

In all ages and in all religions, spiritual aspirants and devotees have given a natural expression to their innermost yearnings and noblest sentiments in hymns, psalms and prayers. Sometimes they sing and pray out of the fullness of their hearts, dwelling in exalted moods untouched by cares and wants. But in most cases it is the consciousness of limitations and imperfections, or the sense of misery and helplessness that makes the weary and struggling souls turn to the omnipotent and ever-perfect Being for solace and succour. As Śrī Kṛṣṇa ṣays in the *Bhagavad-Gītā,* four kinds of persons worship God — the distressed, the seeker of knowledge, the seeker of enjoyment, and the wise.[3]

It is natural for the man of spiritual illumination to worship God, to meditate on Him, and to speak of His glory out of his overflowing love and devotion. But the case of others is different. Buffeted by the troubles of life or worried by the consciousness of sin, and realizing the uselessness of human aid, the careworn soul turns to the Divine for safety and protection. The seeker of enjoyment, finding all human effort fruitless, looks up in his helplessness to God for the fulfilment of his desires. The seeker of knowledge may not have any worldly troubles or material desires to disturb him, but he feels in his heart of hearts a soul-hunger, a sense of void or the misery of a limited existence that nothing in the world can remove. His soul yearns for a higher life and in the course of his search he comes to God, the source of peace and blessedness.

It is out of dire necessity that all these types of devotees seek the divine help and grace. Thus God to them is a constitutional necessity. And so great is the need that even sceptics in their helplessness and despair have been heard to cry out to the Almighty for solace and support. The so-called agnostic's prayer — 'O God, if there be a God, save my soul, if I have a soul' — however humorous it may appear at first, contains a deep truth that cannot but strike a sympathetic student of religious psychology. Even an agnostic cannot but occasionally realize the evanescence of life. The spiritual aspirant realizes and feels it most poignantly, and from the depths of his heart he cries out to the Lord to come to his aid forthwith:

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[2] See Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1970), pp. 807-8

[3] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 7.16

> O Lord, with the passing of every day the duration of life is seen to shorten, and youth decays. The days that are gone never come back; time verily is the devourer of the world. Fortune is as fickle and short-lived as the ripples on the surface of water. And life itself is momentary like a flash of lightning. Therefore, O Thou refuge of all, do Thou even now protect me who seek refuge in Thee.[4]

The advanced seers of Truth can speak from the experience of the Immanent and the Transcendent with whom they associate the idea of purity and holiness. The undeveloped worshipper, however, cannot really entertain any exalted conception of the Godhead. Even if he professes to believe in the all-pervading Spirit, he conceives Him as an omnipotent Being possessing human form and human feelings. And even if he considers his God to be all-loving towards the devotees, he holds Him to be also jealous and fearful, ever ready to punish His devotee's enemies and condemn the 'unbeliever' to eternal hell. And not unoften does the devout worshipper sing in the name of his God of Love a veritable hymn of hate. Further, he sees real and imaginary evils in others, but is unconscious of much greater evils that are to be found in himself. This is a phenomenon witnessed in all religions and creeds more or less in all parts of the world. But as the aspirant outgrows his primitive ideas, he comes to cherish a nobler conception of God who is not only Omnipresent but also the Source of all purity and perfection.

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[4] आयुर्नश्यति पश्यतां प्रतिदिनं याति क्षयं यौवनं
प्रत्यायान्ति गताः पुनर्न दिवसाः कालो जगद्भक्षकः ।
लक्ष्मीस्तोयतरङ्गभङ्गचपला विद्युच्चलं जीवितं
तस्मान्मां शरणागतं शरणद त्वं रक्ष रक्षाधुना ॥

Śrī Śaṁkara, *Śivāparādhakṣamāpaṇa Stotram*, 13

Further, the devotee also comes to possess greater and greater introspection with reference to himself, and this is in reality a chief mark of his spiritual progress. With the dawn of the inner vision he is able to detect easily the evils and impurities that taint his body and mind. He is tormented by his sense of sin and imperfection, and these he wants to shed through the grace and touch of God — the great Purifier — who, according to the Upaniṣadic seers, is 'all-pervading, self-resplendent, formless, pure and untainted by evil' [5], who is 'free from sin', 'who dwells in the sinless heart' [6], and 'who cannot be realized by one who has not turned away from wickedness and has not controlled his mind and senses' [7].

God the Purifier and Saviour

This conception of God as the ever-pure and the Purifier is also found in the *Ṛg-Veda Saṁhitā* itself in which the *ṛṣi* prays to Varuṇa — the great moral ruler of the universe — for being saved from the bonds of sin and evil[8], for forgiveness from sin, a thought that occurs time and again in the mass of Vedic and other Hindu religious literature. In the Upaniṣad the *ṛṣi* prays:

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[5] स पर्यगाच्छुक्रमकायमव्रणमस्नाविरं शुद्धमपापविद्धम्।
Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad, 8

[6] दह्रं विपापं परमेश्मभूतं यत् पुण्डरीकं पुरमध्यसंस्थम्।
Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad, 12.16

[7] नाविरतो दुश्चरितान्नाशान्तो नाशमाहितः।
नाशान्तमानसो वापि प्रज्ञानेनैनमाप्नुयात्॥
Kaṭha Upaniṣad, 1.11.24

[8] वि मच्छ्रथाय रशनामिवाग ऋध्याम ते वरुण खामृतस्य।
मा तन्तुश्छेदि वयतो धियं मे मा मात्रा शार्यपसः पुर ऋतोः॥
'Cast off from me sin, O Varuṇa, as if it were a rope; may we obtain from thee a channel (filled) with water. Cut not the thread of me (engaged in) weaving pious works; blight not the elements of holy rites before the season (of their maturity).'
Ṛg-Veda, 2.28.5

> Being purified by the holy, all-pervading and eternal presence of the effulgent Being, man gets rid of evil. May we too go beyond the touch of sin, our great enemy, being freed from impurity by that ever-holy Presence that purifies all.[9]

Purity being the condition for receiving divine Grace and attaining spiritual illumination and freedom, the devotee prays:

> Whatever sins have been committed by me, by thought, word and deed, may the Supreme Lord forgive me and cleanse me of them all.[10]

Indeed, it is a constant prayer of the devotee in the Upaniṣad:

> May He, the creator and supporter of the gods, and Lord of all, the destroyer of evil, the great seer, He who brought the cosmic Soul into being, endow us with good thoughts.[11]

Evil and impurity in any form cause the greatest misery to the sincere seeker as they stand in the way of his union with the Divine. Hence, in his distress he turns again and again to the Lord, the Sanctifier and Saviour. And the Lord also in His infinite mercy speaks to him words of hope:

> Even if thou art the most sinful among all the sinful, yet by the raft of divine Knowledge thou shalt cross all sin.[12]

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[9] चरणं पवित्रं विततं पुराणं
येन पूतस्तरति दुष्कृतानि।
तेन पवित्रेण शुद्धेन पूताः
अतिपाप्मानमरातिं तरेम॥
Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad, 1.11

[10] यन्मे मनसा वाचा कर्मणा वा दुष्कृतं कृतम्।
तन्न इन्द्रो वरुणो बृहस्पतिः सविता च पुनन्तु पुनः पुनः॥
ibid., 1.12

[11] यो देवानां प्रभवश्चोद्भवश्च विश्वाधिपो रुद्रो महर्षिः।
हिरण्यगर्भं जनयामास पूर्वं स नो बुद्ध्या शुभया संयुनक्तु॥
Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, 3.4

[12] अपि चेदसि पापेभ्यः सर्वेभ्यः पापकृत्तमः।
सर्वं ज्ञानप्लवेनैव वृजिनं सन्तरिष्यसि॥
Bhagavad-Gītā, 4.36

And the God of love comforts the devotee and asks him to surrender himself to Him:

> Relinquish the path of formal religion, and take refuge in Me. I will liberate thee from all sins. Grieve not.[13]

Indeed, the idea of purity and holiness along with that of mercy and compassion is so inseparably connected with the conception of God in Hinduism that it is accepted as an axiomatic truth. And from the depths of the devotee's heart rise the prayers:

> Do Thou forgive me, O Lord, for all my sins. Glory unto Thee, O Thou Ocean of mercy.[14]

> I have committed a thousand sins and am fallen into the terrible ocean of the world. O Lord, I am helpless and have taken refuge in Thee. Do Thou make me Thine own.[15]

The depths of the devotee's love for God

Consciousness of sin and trust in divine forgiveness are certainly essential for man's spiritual growth at a certain stage of his evolution. But these are not the dominating ideas in higher Hinduism, as all Hindu sects and creeds believe in the potential divinity and the purity of the true Self of man, and in its innate freedom from all limitations. The heart of the Hindu devotee yearns more for divine love and communion and spiritual freedom than anything else. He stresses the personal aspect of the Personal-Impersonal.

He wants to come in living touch with Him, to enter into personal relationship with Him, and in his attempt to realize his goal, he gives expression to a variety of sentiments and attitudes, the depths of which cannot be easily gauged by a superficial observer. God, according to him, is not only the all-pervading support of the universe, the cause of all that exists, but also the God of love who manifests His divine glory in intimate relationship with the devotee as Father, Mother, Master, Friend and Child. He manifests even as the eternal Lover of the human soul which yearns from the depths of its being for union with the Beloved. This yearning is called *bhakti* or devotion which, according to Nārada, is ‘ineffable’ [16] and implies ‘the consecration of all activities to God [17], and a feeling of anguish when His presence is forgotten’ [18].

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[13] सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं व्रज।
अहं त्वा सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः ॥
ibid., 18.66

[14] सर्वमेतत्क्षमस्व जय जय करुणाब्धे... ।
Śrī Śaṁkara, *Śivāparādhakṣamāpaṇa Stotram*, 16

[15] अपराधसहस्र सङ्कुले पतितं भीमभवार्णवोदरे।
अगतिं शरणागतं हरे कृपया केवलमात्मसात्कुरु ॥
See Swami Yatiswarananda,
Universal Prayers, verse 252.

Ordinarily devotees worship Him as the divine Master, Father or Mother; the eternal Lover is beyond their reach. But still there are some blessed souls who are fit to approach Him with an all-consuming and all-embracing love, that includes all other attitudes in its sweep and in which these find their highest fulfilment and realization. Very touching is the prayer that rises from the heart of Śrī Yāmunācārya:

> O Lord, first of all do Thou hear my prayer. I am speaking only the truth and not falsehood. Unless Thou showest Thy mercy on me, Thou wilt never get one more deserving than myself.[19]
>
> Thou art the father, the mother, the husband and the son. Thou art the dear friend, the relative, the teacher and the goal of the universe. I am Thine own, Thy servant and attendant. Thou art my only refuge. I have taken shelter in Thee and verily O Lord, does my burden rest wholly on Thee.[20]

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[16] अनिर्वचनीयं प्रेमस्वरूपम् ।

Nārada Bhakti-Sūtra, 4.51

[17,18] नारदस्तु तदर्पिताखिलाचारता तद्विस्मरणे परमव्याकुलतेति ।

ibid., 1.19

[19] न मृषा परमार्थमेव मे श्रुणु विज्ञापनमेकमग्रतः ।
यदि मे न दयिष्यसे ततो दयनीयस्तव नाथ दुर्लभः ॥

Stotraratna, 50

[20] पिता त्वं माता त्वं दयिततनयस्त्वं प्रियसुहृत् ।
त्वमेव त्वं मित्रं गुरुरसि गतिश्चासि जगताम् ।
त्वदीयस्त्वद् भृत्यस्तव परिजनस्त्वद्गतिरहं
प्रपन्नश्चैवं सत्यहमपि तवैवास्मि हि भरः ॥

Stotraratna, 60

With an unsurpassed passionate love does Śrī Caitanya also pray to the Beloved:

> O Lord of the universe, I want neither a charming wife nor poetic attainments. Do Thou only grant that I may be blessed in every birth with perfect and selfless devotion to Thee.[21]

The all-embracing range of Hindu spiritual experience

The deep raptures of ecstatic love are soul-enthralling. But these do not exhaust the spiritual experience of the Hindu devotee. There are souls of extraordinary spiritual calibre who want to encompass within the range of their experience both the Personal and the Impersonal. Their spiritual consciousness refuses to be limited and circumscribed. They take up all attitudes, they realize all divine manifestations. They enjoy the Beloved in manifold ways. But at times a burning hunger for the Infinite seizes their souls. They dive into the depths of the Absolute and lose themselves in the transcendental Existence, Knowledge and Bliss. And when they come back to the plane of relative existence, they see everything reflecting the radiance of the Infinite about which the Upaniṣad states:

> There the sun shines not, nor the moon and the stars, nor the lightning, much less fire. Everything shines, reflecting His glory. This whole world is illumined by His Light.[22]

Realizing the Transcendent in the Immanent, the eternal Principle in all personalities, the One in the many, they love all, they worship all, they enjoy all. They are quite at home with the Absolute as with the Relative. A glimpse of this allencompassing spiritual vision we get in the hymns and praises composed by Śrī Śaṁkarācārya. This great monist sees the One Reality at the back of everything as in his own soul. He meditates on It and realizes that he is none other than Brahman:

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[21] न धनं न जनं न सुन्दरीं
कवितां वा जगदीश कामये ।
मम जन्मनि जन्मनीश्वरे
भवताद्भक्तिरहैतुकी त्वयी ॥

Śrī Caitanya, *Śikṣāṣṭakam*, 4

[22] न तत्र सूर्यो भाति न चन्द्रतारकं
नेमा विद्युतो भान्ति कुतोऽयमग्निः ।
तमेव भान्तमनुभाति सर्वं
तस्य भासा सर्वमिदं विभाति ॥

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, 2.2.10

> At dawn I meditate within my heart on the self-effulgent Ātman — the Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute — the Goal of the highest ascetics, the Transcendental and the Eternal, who is beyond the states of waking, dream and sleep. I verily am that Indivisible Brahman, and not a combination of elements.[23]

Śrī Śaṁkara, a true seer, recognizes the same divine Principle in all divine ideas. He offers his salutations to the *guru* in whom also he sees the same eternal and infinite Being:

> I offer my salutations to the beneficent Being who is incarnate in the *guru*, who, through the power of illusion as in sleep, sees the universe existing within His own Self, objectively like a city seen reflected within a mirror; who realizes in His enlightened state His own true Self, the One-without-a-second.[24]

To Śaṁkara, Śiva, Viṣṇu, and other gods and goddesses speak of the same Infinite which gives the true meaning to the finite. Addressing Śiva he says:

> I adore the Lord, the Supreme Ātman, the One, the primordial Seed of the universe, the desireless and the formless, who is realized through the symbol *Om,* from whom the universe comes into being, by whom it is sustained, and into whom it dissolves.[25]

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[23] प्रातः स्मरामि हृदि संस्फुरदात्मतत्वं
सच्चित्सुखं परमहंसगतिं तुरीयम्।
यत् स्वप्नजागरसुषुप्तमवैति नित्यं
तद् ब्रह्म निष्कलमहं न च भूतसङ्घः ॥
Śri Śaṁkara, *Prātaḥsmaraṇa Stotram*

[24] विश्वं दर्पणदृश्यमाननगरीतुल्यं निजान्तर्गतं
पश्यन्नात्मनि मायया बहिरिवोद्भूतं यथा निद्रया।
यः साक्षात्कुरुते प्रबोधसमये स्वात्मानमेवाद्वयं
तस्मै श्री गुरुमूर्तये नम इदं श्रीदक्षिणामूर्तये ॥
Śrī Śaṁkara, *Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotram,* 1

[25] परात्मानमेकं जगद्बीजमाद्यं। निरीहं निराकारमोङ्कारवेद्यम् ॥
यतो जायते पाल्यते येन विश्वं। तमीशं भजे लीयते यत्र विश्वम् ॥
Śrī Śaṁkara, *Vedasāra-Śiva Stotram,* 5

With a deep feeling of devotion he prays to Viṣṇu:

> O Lord, the all-pervading One, do Thou remove my egotism, and calm my mind. Do Thou take away my illusion of the world. Do Thou increase my love for all beings and save me from the ocean of worldly existence.[26]

He continues:

> It is the waves that merge themselves in the ocean, and not the ocean in the waves. So verily, O Lord, when all the differences are removed, it is I that lose myself in Thee, and not Thou in me.[27]

The heart of the great monistic philosopher responds most tenderly to the call of the Mother's love and, placing himself in the position of an ordinary devotee, most touchingly he says:

> O Mother, in this world in the midst of Thy numerous worthy sons, I happen to be a specimen of wantonness. Yet, O beneficent One, it is not proper for Thee to abandon me, Thy child. For, a bad son may sometimes be born but never has there been a bad mother.[28]

And Mother to him is the only Refuge:

> O Mother, I have made no charity; I have done no meditation; I have observed no ritualistic procedure; nor have I uttered any holy Name. I have performed no worship; nor have I purified my limbs through proper invocations. There-

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[26] अविनयमपनय विष्णो दमय मनः शमय विषयमृगतृष्णाम् ॥
भूतदयां विस्तारय तारय संसारसागरतः ॥
Śrī Śaṁkara, *Viṣṇu-ṣaṭpadī* 1

[27] सत्यपि भेदापगमे नाथ तवाहं न मामकीनस्त्वम् ।
सामुद्रो हि तरङ्गः क्वचन समुद्रो न तारङ्गः ॥
ibid., verse 3

[28] पृथिव्यां पुत्रास्ते जननि बहवः सन्ति सरलाः
परं तेषां मध्ये विरलतरलोऽहं तव सुतः ।
मदीयोऽयं त्यागः समुचितमिदं नो तव शिवे
कुपुत्रो जायेत क्वचिदपि कुमाता न भवति ॥
Śrī Śaṁkara, *Devyaparādhakṣamāpaṇa Stotram*, 3

> fore, O Thou Mother of the universe, Thou art my only refuge; Thou art my only refuge.[29]

But to him, in spite of the wonderful play of the tenderest sentiments, the Divine Mother is none other than Brahman, and human personality is only Her reflection. In sport, has She divided the One Absolute Intelligence into God and souls. And it is in Her Being that he wants to lose himself:

> O Mother of the universe, when will my senses become controlled? When shall I have neither enemies nor friends? When shall I be free from false and deluding hopes? When will my mind be destroyed with its roots? [30]

Indeed when we are able to study the Hindu hymns and prayers with intelligence and insight we cannot help declaring with the Vedic seer: 'The Being is one, but sages call Him variously' [31], an idea expressed so clearly and sincerely in the famous passage in the *Śivamahimna Stotram:*

> Various are the paths laid down in the Veda, Yoga, Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava scriptures. Of these some people take to one and some to another as the best. Devotees follow these diverse paths, straight or crooked, according to their different tendencies. Yet, O Lord, Thou alone art the ultimate Goal of all men, as is the ocean of all rivers.[32]

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[29] न जानामि दानं न च ध्यानयोगं। न जानामि तन्त्रं न च स्तोत्रमन्त्रं ।।
न जानामि पूजां न च न्यासयोगं। गतिस्त्वं गतिस्त्वं त्वमेका भवानि ।।
Śrī Śaṁkara, *Bhavāṇyaṣṭakam*, 3

[30] कदा वा हृषीकाणि साम्यां भजेयुः
कदा वा न शत्रुर्न मित्रं भवानि।
कदा वा दुराशाविषूचीविलोपः
कदा वा मनो मे समूलं विनश्येत् ।।
Śrī Śaṁkara, *Devī-bhujaṅgaprayāta Stotram*, 20

[31] एकं सद्विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति . . .।
Ṛg-Veda 1.164.46

[32] त्रयी साङ्ख्यं योगः पशुपतिमतं वैष्णवमिति
प्रभिन्ने प्रस्थाने परमिदमदः पथ्यमिति च।
रुचीनां वैचित्र्यादृजुकुटिलनानापथजुषां
नृणामेको गम्यस्त्वमसि पयसामर्णव इव ।।
Puṣpadanta. *Śivamahimna Stotram*, verse 7

Prayer then, in one form or other, is essential for all kinds of aspirants. It is an expression of the soul's longing for God. One can feel as much love and longing for the Infinite as for the Personal Deity. It is only a question of temperament. The prayer of a *bhakta* is more expressive and emotionally charged. The prayer of a *jñānī*, the seeker of knowledge, may not be expressed in words, and he may remain calm. But his deep inner silence itself is a kind of great inner prayer. Sometimes in the same person we find these two moods alternating. What is important is to feel an intense longing for superconscious realization. Those who are unable to keep up the longing through silent prayer may take the help of verbal prayers like the ones already mentioned.

Moreover, let us not be selfish in our prayers. Just as we pray for ourselves, we should pray for others too. Pray for those who are near and dear to you. Then pray for those who are good and struggling for spiritual enlightenment. Finally, pray for all people, all beings everywhere. Send forth good prayers in all directions. Let peace and goodwill radiate from you in all directions.

Given below are some prayers and meditations which Swami Yatiswarananda used to recite in the beginning of his classes and lectures — Ed.

> Let us offer our salutations to the all-pervading, all-blissful divine Spirit who dwells in the hearts of us all. He is the Lord of the past, present and future. By realizing Him, one goes beyond fear and attains peace. He is the supreme Principle of existence, the supreme Reality, the supreme Light and the supreme Self. Out of Him, the all-pervading, all-blissful divine Spirit, we all have come into being, in Him we live, to Him we return, *Om Śāntiḥ, Śāntiḥ, Śāntiḥ.*
>
> Let us for a few moments sit quiet, relaxing our body and mind. Let us offer our salutations to the Supreme, all-pervading Spirit. May He guide our understanding. Let us offer our salutations also to all the great teachers and saints of the world — teachers and saints whose teachings we all have inherited. May they inspire us with love for the Truth.

The supreme Spirit is the Source of all purity. Let us breathe in vibrations of purity, let them destroy all our impurities; let us breathe out vibrations of purity. Let us breathe in vibrations of strength, let them destroy all our weaknesses; let us breathe out vibrations of strength. Let us breathe in vibrations of peace, let the vibrations destroy all our restlessness; let us breathe out vibrations of peace. Let us send forth currents of purity, strength and peace to all our fellow beings, to the east, to the west, to the north, to the south. Let us be at peace with ourselves, at peace with the whole world.

Let us now take up the position of the witness or the spectator and draw our mind from all distractions, from sound and other troubles. Let us detach ourselves also from all thought, pictures and feelings that rise within. Let us be wide-awake. Our body is the divine temple. Let us focus our consciousness in the sanctuary of our heart and there feel that our soul is like a little sphere of light and this little sphere of light is part of the infinite Spirit shining everywhere. The infinite Being is immanent in the sun, moon, stars and planets. The infinite Spirit shines in all beings. The Spirit is immanent in our eyes, ears, in all our senses. The divine Spirit shines in our mind. It shines in our heart. Let us all feel the contact.

The monist meditates on the supreme Spirit as *Sat-Cit-Ānanda,* Infinite Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. The devotee worships the same Being in various aspects as God the Father, God the Mother, God the Friend, God the Beloved. The infinite Spirit manifests Itself as the great gods and goddesses. He again comes down on earth, as it were, in the form of the divine Incarnation for blessing mankind. We may select any theme we please, for our meditation, but as we meditate, let us all feel that both the worshipper and the Worshipped are drowned in the one *Sat-Cit-Ānanda,* Infinite Existence-Consciousness-Bliss.

It is really the one infinite Being that manifests Itself in one aspect as the devotee, in the other aspect as the Deity. Let us feel the divine contact in our heart of hearts, and may the divine Presence soothe our nerves, calm our minds, quiet our hearts. May the divine Spirit guide our understanding and enlighten our consciousness.

Let us for a few moments meditate on the all-pervading, all-blissful Spirit in any aspect we please, in any way we please. But let us by all means feel the divine contact.

May the all-pervading, all-blissful Spirit, the Soul of our souls protect us all, may He guide us all, may He nourish us all, may the teachings that we learn become fruitful and forceful through His grace, may peace and harmony dwell amongst us all. *Om, Śāntiḥ, Śāntiḥ, Śāntiḥ.*

O Lord, all spiritual paths are like streams to Thee, the one Ocean of existence, consciousness, bliss.

Thou art the Soul of our souls.

Thou art our Mother. Thou art our Father. Thou art our Friend. Thou art our Companion. Thou art our knowledge. Thou art our wealth. Thou art our all-in-all.

From the unreal, lead us to the Real. From darkness, lead us to Light. From death, lead us to Immortality.

Reach us through and through our soul and evermore bless us all with Thy inspiring presence.

May we find Thee in the heart of our hearts. May we find Thee in all our fellow beings. May we love Thee and serve Thee in all.

May the world be peaceful. May all be free from danger. May all realize what is good. May all be actuated by noble thoughts. May all be happy everywhere. *Om, Śāntiḥ, Śāntiḥ, Śāntiḥ.**

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* For more prayers, see Swami Yatiswarananda, *Universal Prayers* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974).

CHAPTER 23

MYSTIC WORSHIP

Offer everything to God

'What is most covetable to people in general and whatever is specially dear to oneself should be offered unto Me. That offering produces infinite results.' [1]

We worship with the things we get from Him. We do not create the flower, nor do we create the fire. These come to our hands and the way we use them makes the difference. The devotee offers everything that comes to him to the Lord. And what is the fun of that? Thereby you expand your soul. By offering to God what He gives you, you yourself feel purified and your soul grows. It assimilates a larger share of the blessings of the Lord. The more you appropriate those things as your own, the narrower and more clouded your soul becomes.

Anything can be offered to the Divine: your food, new dress, car, everything you get. Before you start using it, first offer it to the Lord mentally. Accept it as a sacramental thing and use it with care. This purifies the mind, elevates it. God is the greatest purifier. Anything connected to Him becomes holy. By handling sanctified things we sanctify ourselves, purify ourselves. In our *āśramas* (monasteries), our new publications and invitation cards are first sent to the shrine. They are put in circulation only after they are offered to the Divine. This is a good practice which you can do in your home regarding everything you buy.

The act in itself may not be great. But when hundreds of little actions of this type, hundreds of little offerings to the Divine are done, the cumulative effect of all these after some years is really tremendous. Gradually, a spirit of surrender and detachment will come to stay with us. In fact, there is no other way to get this. Surrender and purity do not come all of a sudden. They are the accumulated result of hundreds of little actions.

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[1] यद्यदिष्टतमं लोके यच्चातिप्रियमात्मनः ।
तत्तन्निवेदयेन्मह्यं तदानन्त्याय कल्पते ॥
Bhāgavatam, 11.11.41

In the devotional schools, especially in Vaiṣṇavism, service of holy men and poor people is stressed very much. Service is an important thing in spiritual life. Offering everything to the Divine and then using it oneself is no doubt good. It connects you to the Divine. But what is the test of your sincerity? How do you know that you are prepared to renounce everything for God? The only test is your readiness for sacrifice. You should be ready to sacrifice everything for the Divine. The best way to cultivate the idea of sacrifice is through service. Service naturally implies some kind of sacrifice. When a hungry man comes to you, give him a share of your food; when a poor man comes to you, give him a share of your wealth. Similarly you have to sacrifice your time, pleasures, energy, etc. for the service of those who are ill, ignorant or suffering. Look upon everyone as a temple of God. By serving man, you are worshipping the Lord. This was the great idea behind Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of work. It is no use talking about spirituality to a man who is poor and hungry. He should be given food first. That is a way of worshipping the Lord. Offering flowers and incense is not the only form of worship.

We should develop a synthetic vision, a wider perspective. At the back of our limited existence, our limited consciousness, our limited joys, there is the one undivided infinite Being manifesting Himself through every individual. Offering everything to Him is the highest form of worship. If we are capable of doing this form of worship, why remain satisfied with the lower ones alone?

Upāsanā or mental worship

Apart from worshipping God with material objects there is another kind of worship, mental worship, which is actually a higher form of worship. In Sanskrit it is called *upāsanā*, which literally means 'to sit near' (the Deity). In practice, it means 'meditation' or 'contemplation' on God. This kind of mental worship is the principal spiritual practice in the dualistic and qualified monistic systems of Vedānta. These systems regard God and the self as two separate entities. The worshipper strives to bring about the contact of these two in varying degrees of intimacy, but the distinction between the two is never totally lost. The devotee at first remains the servant, and God the Master. In the advanced stages the devotee remains as the soul and God as the Soul of all souls. This attitude may serve as a stepping-stone to the path of non-dualism or Advaitism.

For those whose nature inclines towards a formless God, it may be helpful in the beginning to conceive of Brahman, or the supreme Spirit, as the ocean while the individual soul is looked upon as a wave. There is the 'I' of the individual soul, distinct from the supreme Spirit, but actually it exists only in the relation of microcosm to macrocosm. Instead of meditating always on the wave, one may concentrate on the ocean. The wave is one with the element water. It is identifiable both with the vast mass we call the ocean and with the smaller entity we call the wave. As the seeker advances along the spiritual path, he is finally able to realize that water alone is real and the waves are unreal. The distinction between the individual and the Universal, the microcosm and the macrocosm, is lost, and the Absolute, the One-without-a-second, alone remains.

However, this is all very difficult to attain for the vast majority of people who need some kind of worshipful symbols for their meditation. Otherwise their mind wanders. In order to facilitate concentration, some holy objects are selected. This kind of worship in which an object is taken as a symbol of God is a practice common to the devotees of Personal God as well as to those who meditate on the Impersonal. God is worshipped not as the symbol, but *through* the symbol. Since God by definition[2] is the supreme Spirit out of which all things come into existence, by which all things are sustained, and into which all things return, any object can in a way become a symbol of God. But the world religions have since time immemorial held certain symbols as specially sacred.

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[2] जन्माद्यस्य यतः । *Brahma-Sūtras,* 1.1.2

The sun is a good symbol of God as the source of the cosmic energy, as light and heat, and the sun worship was once widely prevalent all over the world. The Hindus and Zoroastrians worship fire as a symbol of God. The Vedas speak of *agni* (fire) as immortal who has taken up his abode among the mortals, and also as the 'mouth of gods' through whom all other gods receive oblations. But we must always bear in mind that the symbol is *not* God. We must see beyond mere fire or sun in our meditations and find the eternal Light itself, of which the symbols are but manifestations.

Swami Brahmananda, one of the greatest among the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, tells us:

> Men incline to different ways of worship. To satisfy the various temperaments the scriptures describe four distinct methods of reaching God. One method is ritualistic worship — that is, worshipping God in the image or symbol. Higher than this is the worship of God with prayer and *japa.* The aspirant meditates on the shining form of his Chosen Ideal. He prays to Him and makes *japa.* Higher still is meditation. That is, a constant flow of thought towards God. When a man follows this way of worship, he remains absorbed in the living presence of his Chosen Ideal. Here, there is neither prayer nor *japa.* But the sense of duality remains. He *is* and I also *am.* The highest method, which leads directly and immediately to God, is to meditate on the unity of the Ātman with Brahman; to experience Brahman constantly, to know always that He *is.* It is an actual realization of the Omnipresent Reality. These are the stages through which the aspirant progresses. A man should begin from where he stands.[3]

There is a well-known Sanskrit verse which says:

> The highest spiritual discipline is the practice of Brahman consciousness. The next is meditation. Chanting of hymns and repetition of the divine Name form the third step. The lowest is external worship with the help of an image.[4]

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[3] Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1971), p. 244

[4] उत्तमो ब्रह्मसद्भावो ध्यानभावस्तु मध्यमः ।
स्तुतिर्जपोऽधमोभावो बहिःपूजाधमाधमा ॥
Mahānirvāṇa Tantra, 14.122

According to another verse:

> Worshipping the Idol is the first step; better than this is repetition of a holy Name and singing of divine glories. Better still is *dhyāna* or contemplation and the last and the highest state is to realize 'I am He'.[5]

Yet another verse says:

> The twice-born ritualists worship God in the fire. Men of meditation adore Him as the indwelling Spirit. The dull-witted worship Him with the help of an image. The same-sighted illumined souls find Him everywhere.[6]

Advanced souls do not care for the outside symbol; they meditate on the Deity as immanent, as dwelling in their own hearts. Persons of gross understanding can only begin their spiritual life by worshipping the Deity with the help of an image which is like a peg to hang their faith on. Enlightened souls, on the other hand, do not need any symbols, for they recognize the divine Spirit both inside and outside, as immanent and transcendent at the same time.

To merge oneself in the Absolute, the One-without-a-second, is the goal of the Advaitic spiritual practice. This state is reached through an uncompromising analysis of one's thoughts and experiences in search of the ultimate Reality, the unchanging basis of the ever-changing phenomenal universe. The follower of this method, being established in perfect purity, negates all the limiting adjuncts of the soul and through it reaches the ultimate Reality. This process, called *nididhyāsana*, is a kind of withdrawal or enquiry into the depths of one's being.

With a view to attaining the unity of the individual self and the supreme Spirit, a less qualified spiritual seeker may practise *ahaṁgraha upāsanā*, a method of worship in which the worshipper identifies himself with the object of his worship — God or Brahman or any particular Deity — and meditates on his own Self. Meditation on the identity between the worshipper and the Worshipped leads to the realization of the One-without-a-second.

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[5] प्रथमा प्रतिमा-पूजा जपस्तोत्रादि मध्यमा ।
उत्तमा मानसी पूजा सोऽहं पूजोत्तमोत्तमा ॥
Tantrasāra

[6] *Uttara Gītā*, 3.7

Worship through symbols

For those who find this process also difficult, *pratīkopāsanā* or worship with the help of some appropriate symbol, is prescribed. The Deity is worshipped not as the symbol, but *through* the symbol. The aim is to recognize in the limited symbol, the presence of the all-pervading Spirit which transcends all limitations of name and form. As Swami Vivekananda remarks, 'Where Brahman Himself is the object of worship, the *pratīka* stands only as a substitute or a suggestion thereof.'[7] The *pratīka* may be internal, like the mind, the intellect or the soul of the worshipper; or it may be external, like the sun, *ākāśa* (space), *agni* (fire), or a sound symbol like *'Om'*, etc. Through properly performed meditation, the same Spirit is ultimately recognized as pervading and transcending both the internal and external planes of existence.

Those who find even the above-mentioned symbols of worship to be too abstract or subtle should begin with the use of a *pratimā* or an anthropomorphic image. But even here it should be clearly understood that the idol should be worshipped as a symbol of Īśvara or the supreme Spirit. As Swami Vivekananda says: 'If the image stands for a god or a saint, the worship does not lead to liberation, but if it stands for the one God, the worship thereof will bring *bhakti* (devotion) and *mukti* (liberation).'[8]

In India annual worship of Durgā or Ganeśa is done in a clay image. The festival is concluded by immersing the images in a river or a lake. Once Mathur, the son-in-law of Rani Rasmani who built the great temple of Kālī at Dakshineswar, found it difficult to part with the image after the annual worship of Durgā. His heart broke to think of the image, which he had worshipped with great devotion for several days, being thrown into the river. He gave orders that nobody should move the image, and remained like a petulant child. His relations and officials ran to Sri Ramakrishna for help. Sri Ramakrishna came and asked Mathur: 'Is the Mother only in the image? Why don't you install Her in your heart, Her permanent abode, and throw away this clay image of Hers?' When the thought that the Divine Mother dwells for ever in his heart dawned on him, Mathur immediately became his normal self and the immersion ceremonies went off all right.[9] This simple incident reveals the spirit of Hindu worship of images.

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[7] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1964), Vol. III, p. 60

[8] ibid., p. 61

God is one, but His aspects are many. As it is impossible for us to worship Him in all His fulness and glory, we take up some aspect or other of the Lord. But even in order to approach Him through any of His personal aspects, as Śiva or Viṣṇu or the divine Power, we need the help of different symbols — material, verbal, or mental — which may be taken up either singly or jointly. The symbol is not the Reality. It is only a means of remembering the Lord through the association of ideas.

The neophyte in spiritual life may take the help of material symbols in the form of an image of a Deity or a *yantra* (a geometrical figure representing the Ideal). As he advances he may dispense with material help and make use of sound symbols to call up the divine Idea. Advancing further, he may do away with both the material and the sound symbols, and proceed with purely mental worship on the plane of thought, silently and quietly. And even this he can give up, when, at the very thought of the Divine, he is able to lose his little self, like a salt doll, in the infinite ocean of Existence, in which all distinctions between the worshipper and the Worshipped disappear completely.

Our vision is limited; and all that we see is coloured by this limitation. What we see is not light as it is, but only a reflection, and that also within a certain range. Our understanding is also circumscribed. We cannot realize the ultimate Reality directly. What we know, we know through the limiting adjuncts of our mind through the medium of what Śaṁkarācārya calls *kāla, deśa* and *nimitta* — time, space and causation. Every perception is coloured by the mind, its waves and images. In short, we are bound to the domain of symbols, which point to the Truth but at the same time hide It.

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[9] Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1970), pp. 448-49

However, we must remember that there are symbols and symbols, the real ones and the false ones. The mirage has got the appearance of water, but it is a delusive phenomenon which has nothing to do with water; whereas, the wave may be recognized as a true symbol of the ocean, because it rises out of it, is in touch with it, and also gets merged in it. Like the ocean, it is made of the same substance, water.

Further, there are lower and higher symbols. Letters of a word are the sound symbol of a name, which in turn is a symbol of the mental image; the image itself is a symbol of thinking process; and even thought becomes a symbol of the Reality which it tries to express, but can do so only in the above-mentioned indirect way. Between the Reality and its expression a number of symbolic processes intervene. This deep mystery was understood in India long, long ago. That is why various kinds of symbolic worship have been tolerated and cultivated in India. The illumined souls cut through all intervening media and penetrated deep into the very essence of Reality and have left behind them footprints for less qualified aspirants to follow their trails.

In Hinduism, the domain of symbols and worship of divine Personalities is a vast one, and therefore here we shall deal only with some of the symbols used, and divine Personalities adored, in worship and meditation, from the Vedic times down to present day, with a view to realizing God in some aspect or other.

Some Hindu religious symbols

Śiva is worshipped in an image or in the form of a *liṅga*, which, whatever be its original significance, does not call up in the minds of the worshippers of Śiva any phallic association at all. To them, the *liṅga* is just a non-anthropomorphic, aniconic form of symbol of the supreme Spirit which, though manifest in forms, transcends them all. The Tāntric devotee takes the *liṅga* as a symbol of the divine male-female creative power. *Śālagrāma-śilā* is another non-anthropomorphic symbol associated with Viṣṇu, who is often worshipped in the four-handed image, holding conch, wheel, mace and lotus, or in His divine Incarnations as Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, etc. The followers of Tantra, and even others, sometimes worship the Deity in the *yantra* or geometrical diagrams representing the mystical body of the divine Being. Sometimes a *paṭa* or two-dimensional painting or picture (the 'icon' of the Greek church) serves as the symbol, instead of the three-dimensional image in which the Deity is invoked. In many types of mystical worship, a *ghaṭa* (pot) full of water is used, either solely or in addition to other forms, to represent the formless, all-pervading Spirit. *Agni* or fire may also take the place of other forms. The lighted fire is regarded as the body of God and is worshipped by offering oblations into it.

In refined types of worship, a *mantra* like *Om* or some divine Name serves as the symbol. A *mantra* literally means 'a sound symbol which, when repeated and reflected on, frees the soul from bondage.' [10]

As a sound symbol, *Om* represents the undifferentiated (*akhaṇḍa*) Brahman; the other *mantras* or Names represent the differentiated (*khaṇḍa*) aspects of the same Being. Different Tāntric divinities are assigned special *bīja* (seed) *mantras* which are credited with the power to originate or evolve their corresponding divine Forms or manifestations before the meditating devotee.

The holy Names are the sound manifestations of the divine power which is awakened through *japa* or the repetition of the Word, and the meditation on its meaning. Says Śrī Caitanya: 'Various are Thy names, O Lord, and in each Thou hast infused Thy full power.' [11] The many names of the Deity represent His various aspects which can be realized through

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[10] मननात् त्रायते इति मन्त्रः ।

[11] नाम्नामकारि बहुधा निजसर्वशक्तिस्तत्रार्पिता ।
Śikṣāṣṭakam, 2

japa. The practice of using a multiplicity of names for the same God comes down from the Vedic times.

When we study the life of a Christ, a Caitanya or a Ramakrishna we find that to all of them God was the highest Reality. The Divine was the central object in their lives and everything else was subordinate to it. You may take up any symbol and any kind of relationship with God — you may look upon Him as your father, mother, child, friend or lover — but always make Him your nearest and dearest. The intensity of love as expressed in the following well-known stanza is most important.

> O Supreme Lord, Thou art my father and mother;
> Thou art my relative and friend;
> Thou art my knowledge and wealth;
> Thou art my all in all.[12]

Spiritual progress through worship

There are people who renounce rituals before they are sufficiently developed spiritually. This is very wrong, just as renouncing image worship before having outgrown it is wrong. Never decry people who worship images. There is a great truth in image worship, and the Protestants are quite wrong in denying it. They do not know anything of spiritual traditions and spiritual life. There is not only subjective, but also objective manifestation in a holy Image. This idea is at the back of the Roman Catholic forms of image worship, even though these have become distorted at the hands of theologians in the course of centuries. For most of us, worship of some image, physical or mental, is absolutely necessary if we really wish to grow, and not merely to theorize.

But if we find that all our life we remain worshipping only images, there is something seriously wrong. We should always see whether as a result of our *sādhanā* we are making spiritual progress or not. External worship may be useful to us in the beginning. Some people are great ritualists and derive great joy in it. But we should not spend all our life just doing external worship. External worship should lead us to internal worship sooner or later. We should not be like the musk-deer. It has musk in its own navel, but runs about just to find the source of the sweet fragrance, and then it finally falls down dead. Similarly the God we seek dwells eternally in our hearts, but we want to find Him outside.

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[12] त्वमेव माता च पिता त्वमेव त्वमेव बन्धुश्च सखा त्वमेव ।
त्वमेव विद्या द्रविणं त्वमेव त्वमेव सर्वं मम देवदेव ॥
Prapanna Gītā, 28

We are always creating our own God or gods. We try to create an image of God Mahādeva, and it turns out to be an ugly monkey. If we do not know the right idea and also how to apply it to life, everything becomes an ugly monkey. That is the danger.

> For one who attains to salvation, worship of an image is a hindrance and brings about rebirth. Therefore the man of renunciation should worship the God who dwells in his own heart. He should give up all external worship.[13]

This is meant for advanced spiritual aspirants. It does not mean that everyone should give up worshipping images and straightaway begin with meditation on the Formless. The most important point is to seek the Divine in one's own soul, in the depths of one's own heart. Spiritual life is just like a staircase. We must proceed step by step. We must first find out where we are, otherwise progress is not possible. We may begin with external worship, going to temples etc. but we should become more and more introspective and seek the Divine in His real abode, in our souls.

The body as a temple of God

'This body of ours is a temple of the Divine', says one of the minor Upaniṣads.[14] The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* expresses this idea by means of a charming simile: 'Know the Self within you to be the master of the chariot, and the body to be the chariot.' [15]

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[13] *Maitreyī Upaniṣad*, 2.26

[14] देहो देवालयः ।
ibid., 2.1

[15] आत्मानं रथिनं विद्धि शरीरं रथमेव तु . . . ।
Kaṭha Upaniṣad, 1.3.3

Instead of worshipping God in the elements like fire and water, in plants and animals, or in images of clay, stone and metal, we may worship Him in the image of the human body, regarding it as a temple or a chariot, or a house of the Divine who dwells and shines in the hearts of us all. Through the worship of the all-pervading God in the microcosm, we come to realize Him also in the macrocosm, the microcosm being a miniature of the macrocosm.

But if, instead of the divine Principle, the symbol, or form, or personality becomes more important, then the worship loses all its spiritual value. So it is necessary that, in order to profit by our worship and prayer, we cultivate the right mood and attitude, without which spiritual progress is not possible at all. But how is the right mood to be created? The Tāntric books have laid down that this can be done by controlling the lower planes of thinking, through a graded realization of the spiritual possibilities in us. The different planes of thinking, associated with the six Yogic centres of the spinal cord and the seventh in the brain, may be likened to the different storeys of a building connected by a staircase. The centres are like points of contact between ourselves and various planes of consciousness.

The path of spiritual practice, in which consciousness is made to rise from one centre to another up to the highest plane is a most difficult one. But every aspirant, who wants to follow the path of meditation, should try to raise the 'focus of will' or the centre of consciousness at least to the centre in the region of the heart. This centre may be likened also to an 'inner space'. Some find it easier to make the heart, and some the forehead, the centre of their consciousness.

Those who are not drawn towards any particular symbol or image may meditate in some higher centre or plane of consciousness, on the divine Light that permeates not only one's own being but the whole universe of men and things. However, the aspirant who cannot do without a form, may carry on meditation on a luminous Form which will ultimately lead to meditation on the formless Luminosity, the light of the Spirit that illumines all things.

The soul is covered with a causal body, which in turn is covered by a mental body and then by a physical body. All these three bodies — causal, mental, physical — are tainted. The causal body is tainted by primordial Ignorance. The mental body is tainted by our tendencies and emotions. The physical body, as well as the mental body, is tainted by the inharmonious ego with its selfish desires. A disharmonious ego makes the mind sick; a sick mind affects the senses; and both together disturb the functioning of the body, a fact which is being proved every day by contemporary psychology. However, there is a cure for this disharmony. Take them all, gross and subtle bodies together, to the Source from which they came. We forget the supreme fact that we live in God, and God lives in us. All things, including ourselves are to be connected with the divine Principle.

We know very little about ourselves or how our senses work. For instance, on the lowest plane of living we are identified with our physical senses, but as we become more spiritually aware, our higher centres of consciousness are strengthened so that they can control the lower centres. There are various centres of consciousness, and through meditation one proceeds from the lower to the higher ones until the individual soul is united with the Oversoul. It takes much practice, but slowly the consciousness is lifted upward. By keeping the channels clear and by an effort of the will, the level of consciousness is raised until we have a glimpse of the highest Reality, when for a moment we become inseparable from the supreme Spirit. We know then that there is something of that divine Spirit immanent in us. If we can feel the constant presence of that Spirit, both within and without us, we shall become charged with a new energy. There will be changes in the quality of our living and our service. Our attitude both toward others and toward ourselves will be different.

Very few of us can attain to this superconscious state in this manner by sheer exercise of the will, and thus get rid of the ego, or go beyond the senses. But the realization of immanence we *can* attain through *japa* and meditation.

Japa — the best form of mystic worship

Worship is done in three forms, physical, verbal and mental, that is, external worship, praise and prayer, and meditation. Of these, the first one consisting of rituals and ceremonies according to scriptural injunctions has almost fallen out of use in the life of an average individual, and this is mainly due to the stress of social life, absence of leisure and other inconveniences in modern life. Noticing the tendency of this age, the authors of Purāṇas have laid great emphasis on verbal and mental worship — and of these again, particularly, on verbal worship.

Verbal worship may mean reciting only one Name or many Names and attributes of the Divine. The former is called *japa* and the latter, *stotra* or *kīrtana*, but generally the two are bracketed together.

'The Seeker after Truth,' says Manu, 'reaches the highest Goal by *japa* alone.' [16] And '*japa*,' declares the *Mahābhārata*, 'is said to be the best of all spiritual practices.' The *Bhāgavatam* supports this view whole-heartedly when it observes: 'That which one obtained through meditation in *Satya-yuga*, through sacrifice in *Tretā-yuga*, through worship in *Dvāpara-yuga*, may be attained in *Kali-yuga* by reciting the names of the Lord.' [17] And this recitation or *japa* implies also dwelling on the divine attributes. This means that along with the repetition of the Name, the aspirant should either visualize a holy Form — usually the form of his favourite Deity called his *Iṣṭa Devatā* (or Chosen Ideal) — or think about the divine qualities like love, compassion, power, purity, etc. of the Godhead. The vast majority of the aspirants find it easier to visualize the form of the Chosen Ideal.

Visualization (*bhāvanā*) which means calling up the image of the Deity, with love and reverence, is in itself a higher form of mental worship (*mānasa-pūjā*). Along with *japa*, it is the most popular mode of mystic worship in vogue today. Visualization plays a very important part in the spiritual life of the beginner. *Japa* and visualization must go hand in hand. The holy Form must be visualized as luminous and blissful, and living and real. Think of your body as luminous, and then install the luminous form of your Chosen Ideal in the luminous centre at the region of the heart.

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[16] *Manu-Smṛti*, 2.87

[17] कृते यद्ध्यायतो विष्णुः त्रेतायां यजतो मखैः ।
द्वापरे परिचर्यायां कलौ तद्धरिकीर्तनात् ॥
Bhāgavatam, 12.3.52

Here are given the steps for this kind of visualization. Immediately after having sat down in a proper posture, let the devotee say with folded palms, 'Whether impure or pure, under all conditions, whoever remembers the Lord, becomes purified inwardly and outwardly' [18], and let him feel purity in his body and mind. He may next imagine that the individual soul is rising from the lower centres of the body to the centre in the head and is getting united with the Light of the universal Spirit there. Let him further imagine that both the gross and subtle bodies with all objects and images have merged in the light of the Absolute, which alone now shines everywhere inside and outside. Most of the people cannot remain in this state for long. Next, let the devotee feel his centre of consciousness in the region of the heart and let him visualize that in that centre there has emerged out of the ocean of Light, the effulgent divine Form of his Chosen Ideal, and also the worshipper's spiritualized form freed of impurities. Let the aspirant, identifying himself with the new subtle spiritual body, worship and meditate on the Chosen Ideal along with the repetition of the divine Name for sometime. Let him not lose sight of the Formless, which supports and permeates both the holy Form and also his own new spiritual body. Finally, let the devotee surrender his all to the Divine uttering the following prayer:

> Being subject to the impulses of the vital energy, the intellect and the body, whatever sin has been committed by me in the states of waking, dream and deep sleep, in thought, word and

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[18] अपवित्रः पवित्रो वा सर्वावस्थाङ्गतोऽपिवा ।
यः स्मरेत् पुण्डरीकाक्षं सबाह्याभ्यन्तरः शुचिः ॥

deed, by means of the different organs — may all these be offered to Brahman.[19]

Even after finishing *japa* and meditation in the above-mentioned way, let the devotee hold on to his centre of consciousness, always trying to remain in that elevated mood. Every aspirant must have three things: a definite centre of consciousness, a definite Name (*mantra*) and a holy Form. To be effective, visualization and *japa* must be done with great intensity.

As in material affairs so also in spiritual matters we should be perfectly clear and definite in our thought and action. Some people do not seem to like all those rigid rules and methods of meditation. Usually such a dislike is a sign of inner restlessness and rebellion. Without a certain definite set of rules and procedure in the beginning, no one can proceed in spiritual life. I have seen people practising figure-skating before they set out for the more dangerous sport of free skating on ice. So also, in spiritual life one should first start with fixed rules of meditation; later on, one may go beyond such rules.

Need for a Holy Personality

Very easily the modern man says. 'Oh, God is everywhere!' But when he tries to think of what God is really like, he finds he has no clear-cut idea. Most of the people have only vague and hazy ideas about God. The so-called worshipper of the formless God, when he comes home from church, simply busies himself with his body and its relations. He is unable to rise to the plane of the Spirit and have dealings with an indefinite, abstract Being about whom he talks much. When we have got strong body consciousness, when we take our personality to be the only reality, we need a holy Personality for our spiritual practice and growth.

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[19] A free translation of:
इतः पूर्वं प्राणबुद्धिदेहधर्माधिकारतो जाग्रत्स्वप्नसुषुप्त्यवस्थासु
मनसा वाचा हस्ताभ्यां पद्भ्यामुदरेण शिश्ना यत्कृतं यदुक्तं
यत्स्मृतं तत्सर्वं ब्रह्मार्पणं भवतु स्वाहा ।

On a lower plane, the Absolute becomes abstract, although it is real on a higher plane. And remaining on the lower plane of form and personality as we do, we cannot counteract all bad and unwelcome pictures and thoughts that rise in the mind, by means of abstract ideas. We must be able to raise opposite good and holy pictures and thoughts to counteract them, and here comes the necessity of a holy Personality in whom we find our highest ideas realized. We need a definite holy Form, so long as we consider our forms to be real. But at the same time we must find a connecting link between the Form and the Formless. Form is only a manifestation of the Formless. The holy Personality is a manifestation of the formless Principle that stands at the back of all.

The holy Personality serves as the connecting link between the finite and the Infinite, and understood this way, it satisfies the head and the heart. The intellect wants the Infinite, the feelings want the finite, and in the holy Personality we find both, if we see it in the right light, i.e. as manifestation of the Principle of which the Personality is always conscious.

In calling up this holy Form, one may take the help of the sound symbol, *Om*. And this may be used first with reference to the Form and then also to the Formless. Usually, however, a verbal formula called *mantra*, imparted by a qualified *guru*, is used. The aspirant must have faith in the *guru* and in the power of the *mantra*. While doing *japa*, along with the repetition of the holy Name, the devotee should also think of the form of the *Iṣṭam*, or of the Formless associated with the sound symbol. The centre of consciousness is part of the infinite Consciousness that pervades our entire being, nay, the whole universe and exists even beyond it without any limitations. First, the sound and thought go together and then the sound gets merged in the divine Idea and Consciousness. As you go on with your practice, you will realize more and more what all this means.

There are more approaches than one to the Divine. We too accept Christ, but as you know, being the followers of Sri Ramakrishna, we regard Christ as one of the Incarnations of the Divine — not the sole and only Incarnation, as the

Christians believe. The whole universe including ourselves is a manifestation — ordinary, imperfect manifestation. But Christ, Buddha, Ramakrishna — we regard them all as perfect, special manifestations of the eternal Logos, the eternal Word of the Vedas and the Bible. This idea is common to both easterners and westerners. These perfect manifestations are meant for showing the Light and Truth to imperfect manifestations. The Logos or Word is the one impersonal fact. In its grosser manifestations it becomes personal or human. These manifestations may be many, but That which manifests Itself is one. We may accept all the greatest manifestations, or one or more of them. But all of us must be true to the eternal One that incarnates Itself from time to time for the good of the world.

If a holy Personality as distinct from the Principle behind it appeals to you, you may worship and meditate on Him — but this should be a stepping-stone leading to the realization of the Principle. In due course the Absolute — the Impersonal Being you are trying to meditate on — will reveal to you that it is He who is also manifest as the Personality; that He, the Transcendent, is also the Immanent. And He is to be recognized in His perfect manifestations as also in all imperfect manifestations — in the great prophets as well as in ordinary men and women. In this matter there is no question of the East or the West, for the Divine transcends all limitations.

The sound is a symbol of divinity, the form also is a symbol of divinity. We take the help of both the symbols to call up the divine Consciousness. With the help of the holy Personality, we try to realize the Principle, manifesting Itself as name and form, and we begin to feel that we too are manifestations of that Principle.

After getting a glimpse of the Immanent in the holy Personality, we get a glimpse of It in ourselves and also in other people. We have to learn to see the Divine in all forms, good and bad, without, of course, losing the distinction between good and bad. Then the bad ones cannot affect us at all. We should try to see the Divine not only in the forms that lie in the physical world, but also in those that rise in the mind.

For those who do not like to dwell on the form, the only way is to recognize the Divine in oneself, and also in others. The body is a temple in which dwells the soul and God is the Soul of the soul. This has already been discussed. However, few people can hold on to this high ideal for long.

Conclusion

The word 'worship' in Hinduism thus means something different from what we hear about it in other religions. It means *upāsanā*, which, as already explained, means approaching the Divine step by step until the self attains identity with Him. It means 'mystic worship'. One begins with physical images, then shifts to mental images and the repetition of divine Names, and finally to the union of the soul with the supreme Spirit. Through a graded course of disciplines body consciousness and egotism are progressively reduced, and the potential divinity of the soul manifests more and more. In this march of the soul it passes through several stages and overcomes many obstacles until it attains perfection.

Japa is the best form of worship suited to the modern age. *Japa* should be done in a spirit of mystic worship. It is only when this spirit is lost that it becomes mechanical. Very often people forget this central point. *Japa* should be practised as a higher form of worship. The attitude of love and adoration must be there to make *japa* an effective spiritual discipline. No doubt, even mechanical repetition of the divine Name has some value, as the divine Name itself has its intrinsic power, but when *japa* is done with devotion as a form of worship, our whole soul, mind and body respond to it. This is the secret of attaining success in spiritual life through *japa*.

One point is always to be borne in mind. We should lay stress on the soul more than the body, on God more than the soul. The body should be looked upon only as the dwelling house of the soul, and the soul itself should be looked upon as the seat of God. We must identify ourselves with our souls, and then try to establish contact with God who is the Soul of all souls. If we do not stress this point then our whole life becomes a kind of body worship. Those who look down upon the worship of a holy Personality, and regard it as a kind of idolatry, should know that it is far better than the worship of their own body. True devotees on the other hand see the Divine, immanent in themselves and in all beings. Their whole life thus becomes a worship of the supreme Spirit and they enjoy supreme peace and fulfilment.

CHAPTER 24

THE POWER OF THE DIVINE NAME

The power of words

Do you believe in the power of the word? Let me tell you a story. A coloured man brought a suit against another man for defaming him. In the court the judge asked him what the other man had done.

'He called me a rhinoceros', answered the man.
'How long back?', asked the judge.
'Two years ago.'
'Why then are you complaining now?'
'Because I saw the animal only this morning.'

A name has a great power if we know what it means. When somebody out of spite calls us bad names — rhinoceros, stupid goose or silly ass — we become mad, lose our temper.

Again, we know how we all respond to our names. The best way to draw the attention of a person in a crowd is to call him by his own name. This is also what we do when we want to wake up a sleeping man. The famous English poet Tennyson used to have a remarkable experience which he described in his poem '*The Ancient Sage.*'

> . . . More than once when I
> Sat all alone, revolving in myself
> The word that is the symbol of myself,
> The mortal limit of the self was loosed,
> And passed into the Nameless, as a cloud
> Melts into heaven. I touched my limbs — the limbs
> Were strange, not mine — and yet no shade of doubt,
> But utter clearness, and thro' loss of self.
> The gain of such large life as matched with ours
> Were sun to spark — unshadowable in words
> Themselves but shadows of the shadow-world.[1]

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[1] Quoted by F. Max Muller, *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1928), p. 194

Do you recognize the fact that your own name is a symbol of the Self? Tennyson could, because of his psychic sensibility, use his own name to arouse in him some kind of a glimpse into supersensuous worlds. If an ordinary name has such power how much more power there must be in the divine Name! But this power of the divine Name can be realized only by one who knows its meaning, what it stands for.

The sacred word Om

In the course of his wanderings all over India, Swami Vivekananda one day sat under an old tree near Almora in the Himalayas, and soon became absorbed in deep contemplation. After the meditation was over the Swami told Swami Akhandananda, a brother monk who was accompanying him, 'Well, here under this banyan tree one of the greatest problems of my life has been solved.' The brief note of this experience as he then recorded in his diary runs as follows:

> In the beginning was the Word etc. The microcosm and the macrocosm are built on the same plan. Just as the individual soul is encased in the living body, so is the Universal Soul in the living Prakṛti (Nature) — the objective universe . . . This covering of the one (soul) by the other (Nature) is analogous to the relation between an idea and the word expressing it; they are one and the same and it is only by a mental abstraction that one can distinguish them. Thought is impossible without words. Therefore in the beginning was the Word etc. This dual aspect of the Universal Soul is eternal. So what we perceive or feel is this combination of the Eternally Formed and the Eternally Formless.[2]

Years later, Swami Vivekananda elaborated the above ideas in his 'Bhakti-yoga'.

> The whole of this universe has, according to Indian philosophy, both name and form (*nāma-rūpa*) as its conditions of manifestation. In the human microcosm there cannot be a single wave in the mind-stuff (*citta-vṛtti*) unconditioned by name and form. If it be true that nature is built throughout on the same plan,

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[2] Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama 1974), p. 197

> this kind of conditioning by name and form must also be the plan of the building of the whole of the cosmos. . . . 'As one lump of clay being known, all things of clay are known', so the knowledge of the microcosm must lead to the knowledge of the macrocosm. Now, form is the outer crust of which the name or the idea is the inner essence or the kernel. The body is the form, and the mind or the *antaḥkaraṇa* is the name, and sound symbols are universally associated with *nāma* (name) in all beings having the power of speech. In the individual man the thought waves rising in the limited *mahat* or *citta* (mind-stuff), must manifest themselves, first as *words,* and then as the more concrete *forms.* In the universe, Brahmā or Hiraṇyagarbha or the cosmic *mahat* first manifested himself as name and then as form, i.e. as this universe. All this expressed sensible universe is the form, behind which stands the eternal inexpressible *sphoṭa*, the manifester as Logos, or Word. This eternal *sphoṭa*, the essential eternal material of all ideas or names, is the power through which the Lord creates the universe; nay, the Lord first becomes conditioned as the *sphoṭa* and then evolves Himself out as the yet more concrete sensible universe. This *sphoṭa* has one word as its only possible symbol, and this is the *Om.* And as by no possible means of analysis can we separate the word from the idea, this *Om* and the eternal *sphoṭa* are inseparable; and, therefore, it is out of this holiest of all holy words, the mother of all names and forms, the eternal *Om*, that the whole universe may be supposed to have been created.[3]

In other words, the divine Spirit expresses Itself through the divine Idea, and the divine Idea through divine sound or word. This concept, fundamental to a proper understanding of the power of the divine Name, has been attested to by countless saints and sages who practised this kind of *sādhanā*, and has become a part of the spiritual tradition in India. Swami Brahmananda, speaking about his own experience, says:

> One day, in the course of his teaching, Sri Ramakrishna spoke about the manifestation of Brahman as sound — the Logos. I took this as the subject for my noon meditation. As I sat

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[3] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1964), Vol. III, pp. 56-57

> in meditation, suddenly the Sound-Brahman became revealed to me.[4]

The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* speaks of *Om* as the goal of spiritual endeavour and identifies it with the highest Reality.

> That goal which all the Vedas proclaim, which is implicit in all penances, seeking which men live as religious students, that I will tell you briefly: it is *Om*. It is the supreme, immutable Brahman itself. He who knows it attains the highest fulfilment of life.[5]

The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* compares *Om* to a bow, and the purified and concentrated mind to an arrow, and exhorts us to shoot the arrow with intense alertness so that it may hit the target which is Brahman and becomes one with it.[6] *Om* here stands for the entire meaning of the Upaniṣads, the revealed knowledge. With its help we should concentrate our purified mind on Brahman. *Om* is the most sacred word and symbol in Hinduism and has been handed down from generation to generation from the most ancient times. The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, which contains the essence of Vedānta in a nutshell, declares:

> The syllable *Om*, which is the imperishable Brahman, is the universe. Whatsoever existed, whatsoever now exists, whatsoever shall exist hereafter is *Om*.[7]

The Upaniṣad further analyzes the word *Om* and identifies each syllable with a particular state of consciousness. According to Vedānta the normal experience of man falls into three states: waking, dream and deep sleep. In the same way, the word *Om* can be split up into three syllables A, U and M, and these respectively stand for the three states mentioned above. Since the microcosm and the macrocosm are built on the same plan, the syllables A, U and M also stand for the vast physical universe, the vast mental universe and the causal substratum of both these universes, respectively. Brahman or the absolute Reality, of which these are manifestations, however, transcends them and is represented by the *amātra* or the soundless or unmanifested *Om*.

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[4] Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1971), p. 249

[5] *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 1.2.15,16

[6] प्रणवो धनुः शरो ह्यात्मा ब्रह्म तल्लक्ष्यमुच्यते ।
अप्रमत्तेन वेद्धव्यं शरवत् तन्मयो भवेत् ॥
Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, 2.2.4

[7] ओमित्येतदक्षरमिदं सर्वं तस्योपव्याख्यानं, भूतं भवद्भविष्यदिति सर्वमोङ्कार एव ।
Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad, 1

Logos and Nāda Brahman

Patañjali also in his *Yoga-Sūtras* refers to *Om* as the symbol of *Īśvara* or God.[8] He further states that constant repetition of this *Om* removes all the obstacles to spiritual progress, and leads to the awakening of the Self.[9] *Om* is thus one of the most important word symbols of Hinduism. It is, however, no more mysterious than the 'Word' mentioned in 'The Gospel according to St. John', which begins with:

> In the beginning was the Word,
> and the Word was with God,
> and the Word was God.
> The same was in the beginning with God.
> All things were made by him: . . .
> In him was life; and the life was
> the light of men. . . .
> And the Word was made flesh, and
> dwelt among us, . . .[10]

The author of the Fourth Gospel has here made an attempt to identify Jesus Christ with the Word, the Logos of the Greeks. However, this was not a new idea then. Some of the gods of the ancient cults like Osiris, Mithra etc. too had once been regarded as manifestations of the eternal Logos.

The concept of Logos was widely prevalent in ancient times. According to Heraclitus, one of the early Greek philosophers, there must be some principle regulating the cosmic flux and change, and he called it the Logos. Later on it came to be identified with Universal Reason of which human reason is a part. The Stoics gave it a theistic connotation and identified Logos with their pantheistic concept of God. The Jews originally thought that the world was created by 'the word of the Lord'. The later Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria made this 'word' or 'breath of God' an independent entity and called it the Logos. According to him God acts on this imperfect world through the intervention of the Logos. The Fourth Evangelist, St. John, identified the Logos with God — the two are appellations for one single divine Reality and agency. The Logos became personified as Jesus Christ.

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[8] तस्य वाचकः प्रणवः ।

Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtras*, 1.27

[9] ततः प्रत्यक्चेतनाधिगमोऽप्यन्तरायाभावश्च ।

ibid., 1.29

[10] *Bible*, St. John, 1:1-14

In India the concept of Logos began with the grammarians who called it *sphoṭa*. Later on, the Tantras developed it further. The *mantra-śāstra*, or the Science of *mantras,* which is a division of the Tantras, is based on the theory that the whole universe is created out of vibrations. What we call sound is only external physical vibrations. Subtler than audible sound are the electromagnetic waves like the radio waves. They are vibrations of the ether. Radio waves can be converted into audible sound waves through special instruments within a radio-receiver set. Subtler still are the thought waves. Thought itself is a manifestation of the eternal supersensuous cosmic pulsations of the Nāda Brahman (or Śabda Brahman), the cosmic Mind.

The Nāda Brahman is not a mere theoretical concept. It can be experienced. It can be heard through the subtle mind. Just as the subtle radio waves need special instruments to hear them, so also in order to hear the vibrations of the Nāda Brahman one needs a highly purified mind. When the mind is purified and concentrated, one hears the eternal, extremely subtle, cosmic vibrations as a long-drawn-out, continuous sound, the *anāhata dhvani*. This is not a mere fancy. Nor is it caused by a diseased condition of the ear. It has nothing to do with the morbid sound that a man hears after taking large doses of quinine or having received a blow on the head. It is not the humming sound that you hear when you close your ears with your fingers. It is an entirely different type of experience which is the result of long and steady spiritual practice. The *anāhata dhvani* is the subtle sound vibration that originates in the Nāda Brahman or the cosmic Mind and falls back into it, like the flow of water in a fountain.

These subtle cosmic pulse-beats can be heard only when the mind is calm and the spiritual current rises to a higher plane of consciousness. But it need not necessarily be heard by everyone following the spiritual path. It is heard only by those whose mind is tuned to its rhythm. Other advanced souls may have other experiences. The *anāhata dhvani* is connected with the working of the *suṣumnā* — the central spiritual channel in us that corresponds to the spinal cord. This canal remains closed in most of the people. Through purification, intense aspiration and concentration, the canal can be opened up. The spiritual current then rises in it giving rise to a subtle spiritual music. The Pythagorean mystics in ancient Greece called it the 'music of the spheres'. The Hindu devotees sometimes call it 'the flute of Kṛṣṇa'. The real flute of the eternal Kṛṣṇa is that. The divine music emanating from the cosmic Spirit thrills the soul, and leads it to higher planes of spiritual consciousness.

As Swami Vivekananda observes:

> Again, all articulate sounds are produced in the space within the mouth beginning with the root of the tongue and ending in the lips — the throat sound is A, and M is the last lip sound, and the U exactly represents the rolling forward of the impulse which begins at the root of the tongue till it ends in the lips. If properly pronounced, this *Om* will represent the whole phenomenon of sound production, and no other word can do this; and this, therefore, is the fittest symbol of the *sphoṭa*, which is the real meaning of the *Om*. And as the symbol can never be separated from the thing signified, the *Om* and the *sphoṭa* are one. And as the *sphoṭa*, being the finer side of the manifested universe, is nearer to God, and is indeed that first manifestation of divine Wisdom, this *Om* is truly symbolic of God.[11]

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[11] *The Complete Works,* op. cit., Vol. III, p. 58

What is a mantra?

We thus see how deep and vast is the significance of *Om*. In our spiritual life it is necessary for us to understand the illuminating aspect of *Om*, used in *japa* and meditation as a help towards Self-realization. *Om* usually symbolizes the indivisible and infinite impersonal Absolute, but it may also be used in connection with any personal Deity. In fact, it is considered so sacred that it is used in all sacred rituals and utterances. Usually, however, each personal aspect of God has its own specific sound symbol, the name of the Deity, and sometimes a special mystic syllable called the *bija* or 'seed'. Speaking about this Swami Vivekananda says:

> Again, just as the 'One only' Brahman, the *Akhaṇḍa-Sat-Cit-Ānanda*, the undivided Existence-Knowledge-Bliss, can be conceived by imperfect human souls only from particular standpoints and associated with particular qualities, so this universe, His body, has also to be thought of along the line of the thinker's mind.
>
> This direction of the worshipper's mind is guided by its prevailing elements or *tattvas*. The result is that the same God will be seen in various manifestations as the possessor of various predominant qualities, and the same universe will appear as full of manifold forms. Even as in the case of the least differentiated and the most universal symbol *Om*, thought and sound-symbol are seen to be inseparably associated with each other, so also this law of their inseparable association applies to the many differentiated views of God and the universe: each of them therefore must have a particular word symbol to express it. These word symbols, evolved out of the deepest spiritual perception of sages, symbolize and express as nearly as possible the particular view of God and the universe they stand for. And as the *Om* represents the *akhaṇḍa*, the undifferentiated Brahman, the others represent the *khaṇḍa* or the differentiated views of the same Being; and they are all helpful to divine meditation and the acquisition of true knowledge.[12]

The Sanskrit term *śabda* stands for both sound and word. When we talk, what we hear is only the gross form of sound called *vaikharī*. It is produced by the movements of vocal cords, tongue, etc. Behind that is the word, a product of the thinking process. This is the *madhyamā* sound. Thought itself is the result of a still subtler impulse called the *paśyantī* sound, which in turn originates in the unmanifested Śabda Brahman and this stage of sound is called *parā*. So from *parā*, through *paśyantī* and *madhyamā* to *vaikharī* ranges the thought life of man. How little do we think about our inner world! How carelessly we think and how carelessly we talk! Thinking is a dynamic process and has its origin in an unmanifested subtle source. Wrong thinking works deeper and affects our whole psychosomatic set-up. In the same way, good thoughts improve even the deeper levels of our personality.

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[12] ibid., pp. 58-59

In ordinary thinking we are not aware of the spiritual substratum of our mind. But there are special thought-formulas called *mantras* which lead us to this source. By the repetition of the divine Name (*mantra*) and dwelling on its meaning, we reach subtler and subtler planes of consciousness and become blessed with higher and higher spiritual experiences. Through proper *japa*, apparently dead sounds become living and acquire tremendous power. Every *mantra* has this inherent power (*mantra-caiṭanya*) in it. When a spiritually advanced soul repeats the *mantra*, it becomes charged with its power and becomes 'living'. When he gives the *mantra* to a disciple, this power is transmitted too. The power of the *mantra* can be realized only by those who practise spiritual disciplines systematically and lead pure lives.

The word *mantra* literally means 'that which frees the soul through reflection' (*mananāt trāyate iti*). To dull-minded people a *mantra* is a mere word or a formula. But for an advanced spiritual soul it is a concentrated thought of great power leading to profound spiritual experiences. Through proper repetition of the *mantra*, one can attain the highest illumination and freedom. The *yogī*, by following the trail of the sound, attains spiritual visions of the personal Deity and, later on, transcending all sound vibrations, reaches the supreme Spirit.

Mantras are of various types. One of the most ancient and famous *mantras* is the *Gāyatrī-mantra*. *Namaḥ Śivāya* is the best-known *mantra* of Śiva. *Namo Nārāyaṇāya* is a well-known *mantra* of Viṣṇu. *Hare Rāma Hare Rāma* etc. and *Śrī Rāma Jaya Rāma Jaya Jaya Rāma* are chanted by millions of Hindus. All these are associated with the lives and experiences of countless saints. Each *mantra* when repeated properly, rouses in the aspirant a particular set of vibrations which ultimately reveals the *devatā* (Deity) meditated on. In the Tāntric tradition, *mantras* are not made public. A disciple who receives a *mantra* from his *guru* keeps it a secret and does not reveal it even to his nearest relatives. Each of these *mantras* contains a special syllable called the *bīja* or seed which represents the special power of the Deity concerned. The *bīja* is said to arouse the creative power of the *devatā* in us.

The power of Japa

The power of the *mantra* manifests itself only in qualified aspirants. Towards the end of his life, Sri Ramakrishna one day initiated his disciple Narendra with Rāma *mantra* at the Cossipore garden-house. This produced a remarkable change in Naren who was by nature endowed with great power of self-control. In this instance he entered into an ecstatic state, and went round and round the house repeating the name of the Lord 'Rāma! Rāma!' in a high and excited voice. He had practically no outward consciousness and spent the whole night in this way. When the Master was informed of this, he only said, 'Let him be, he will come round in due course.' Naren came round after some hours.[13]

Every word is the expression of some idea or desire that arises in us. The *mantras* stand for the spiritual urges of man. Just as an ordinary word when heard or uttered can arouse a certain idea or desire in us, so also the *mantras* can arouse in us our latent spiritual tendencies. The expression of these latent spiritual tendencies are common to people of a particular cultural group, and therefore each cultural group has its own sacred word symbols or *mantras*. These when properly repeated rouse spiritual aspiration which usually lies covered in the majority of people. The purpose of *japa* is to awaken the forgotten spiritual tendency in man. Every aspirant must have a Chosen Deity (called his *Iṣṭa Devatā*), a particular *mantra* and a definite centre of consciousness. He must hold on to his centre of consciousness at all times.

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[13] See *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, op. cit., p. 130.

Japa, or the repetition of the divine Name, can be done in different ways. An aspirant may utter it loudly, at least loud enough for him to hear; this is called *vācika*. Or he may inaudibly mumble it moving only the lips. This kind of repetition is called *upāmśu*. The third method is to repeat the *mantra* mentally without allowing the tongue or the lip to move. This silent repetition is called *mānasika*. Mental repetition is definitely the best, but those who find it difficult may practise the other two methods. What is more important is that the aspirant must hold on to his centre of consciousness while doing *japa*.

Japa in the world religions

The Biblical commandment 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain' and Christ's denunciation of 'vain repetition' may be interpreted in several ways. Generally speaking, the stress in Christian religion is more on petitionary prayer than on the repetition of divine Name, though the Catholics do use the rosary for the repetition of *Ave Maria* ('Hail Mary'). But when we come to the Greek Orthodox Church, we find great importance given to a kind of repetition of prayer which resembles the Hindu *japa*. The Greek saints of the Middle Ages perfected a technique of repetition of a simple formula called the Jesus Prayer.[14] In the popular book *The Way of a Pilgrim,* this technique is described as follows:

> The continuous interior Prayer of Jesus is a constant uninterrupted calling upon the divine Name of Jesus with the lips, in the spirit, in the heart; while forming a mental picture of His constant presence and imploring His grace, during every occupation, at all times, in all places, even during sleep. The appeal

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[14] See E. Kadloubovsky and G.E.H. Palmer, *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart,* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951).

is couched in these terms, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.'[15]

In Islam the Sufi mystics have for centuries employed the repetition of Allāh or Ali as a means of getting spiritual illumination. In the school of Al-Ghazālī, the great Muslim theologian of the twelfth century, the instruction given to the initiates is as follows:

> Let the seeker . . . sit alone in some corner, let him see to it that nothing save God — the Most High — enters his mind. Then, as he sits alone in solitude, let him not cease saying continuously with his tongue 'Allāh, Allāh', keeping his thought on it. At last he will reach a state where the motion of his tongue will cease, and it will seem as though the word flowed from it. Let him persevere in this, until all trace of motion is removed from his tongue and he finds his heart persevering in the thought. Let him still persevere until the form of the word — its letters and shape — is removed from his heart, and there remains the idea alone, as though clinging to his heart, inseparable from it. Nothing now remains but to await what God will open to him. If he follows the above course, he may be sure that the light of the Real will shine in his heart.

In Buddhism the main emphasis is on ethical living and meditation. But there are some schools of the Mahāyāna Buddhism which prescribe the repetition of the divine Name as a means of enlightenment. In the most popular Buddhist sect in Japan called the Shin, the aspirant continuously repeats the *mantra, Namo Amitābha Buddhāya* (which in Japanese becomes *Namu-amida-butsu*). In the commentary on the *Sukhāvati Vyūha Sūtra* there is this passage:

> Only repeat the name of Amidā with all your heart, whether walking or standing, sitting or lying, never cease to practise it for a moment. This is the work which unfailingly issues in salvation, for it is in accordance with the original vow of Amidā Buddha.

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[15] *The Way of a Pilgrim* (London: S.P.C.K., 1941), pp. 19-20

Another scripture, the *Sūraṅgama Sūtra* says:

> The value of the practice (of the repetition of the name of Amitābha Buddha) is this. . . . Whoever recites the name of Amitābha Buddha, whether in the present time or in the future time; will surely see the Buddha Amitābha and never become separated from him. By reason of that association, just as one associating with a maker of perfumes becomes permeated with the same perfumes, so will he become perfumed by Amitābha's compassion, and will become enlightened without resorting to any other means.

Japa in Hinduism

Coming to Hinduism, we find great importance given to *japa* in some form or other. The Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava saints of South India and the great saints of North India placed great emphasis on the constant repetition of the divine Name. Saint Tukārām sang:

Lord, let it be that when thy name
  Into my thoughts shall come
My love to thee shall mount like flame,
  My lips with joy be dumb.

Filled are my eyes with happy tears,
  With rapture every limb,
Yea, with thy love my frame appears
  Filled to the very brim.

Thus all my body's strength I'll spend
  In hymns of joyful praise;
Thy name I'll sing nor ever end
  Through all the nights and days.

Yea, Tukā says, forever so
  I'll do, for this is best,
Since at the feet of saints, I know,
  Is found eternal rest.[16]

Guru Nānak and his followers attached great importance to the divine Name. Constant repetition of the divine Name was an important discipline preached by Nānak. Caitanya Mahāprabhu made *japa* popular among all sections of people in Bengal. The triple formula of *Nāme ruci, Jīve dayā, Vaiṣṇava sevā* (delight in the Lord's name, compassion for creatures and service of devotees) forms the creed of his followers. As a young man he was famous for his scholarship and intellectual brilliance. But he gave up everything and became intoxicated with divine Love. He sang:

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[16] From Nicol Macnicol, *Psalms of Marāṭha Saints* (Calcutta: Association Press), pp. 71-72

> Supreme glory be to the singing of Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa's name which cleanses the mirror of the heart and extinguishes the great forest-conflagration of worldly existence; which is, as it were, the streaming of the moonlight on the white lotus of the final beatitude; it is the life and soul of the bride, Vidyā (Self-knowledge); it swells the ocean of bliss; at every stage it imparts the sweetest nectar; it is, as it were, a soothing bath for all souls.[17]

Sri Ramakrishna said:

> *Japa* means silently repeating God's Name in solitude. When you chant His name with single-minded devotion you can see God's form and realize Him. Suppose there is a piece of timber sunk in the water of the Ganges and fastened with a chain to the bank. You proceed link by link, holding to the chain, and you dive into the water and follow the chain. Finally you are able to reach the timber. In the same way, by repeating God's name you become absorbed in Him and finally realize Him.[18]

The Holy Mother used to practise *japa* during her *sādhanā* period — about a lakh of *japa* a day. She demonstrated in her life the power of the divine Name. Through *japa* and *dhyāna* she would lose body consciousness and rise to the heights of superconscious experience. In her teachings she emphasized the importance of *japa* again and again, as illustrated in the following conversations between the Mother and her disciples.

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[17] चेतो दर्पणमार्जनं भवमहादावाग्निनिर्वापणं
श्रेयः कैरवचान्द्रिकावितरणं विद्यावधूजीवनम्।
आनन्दाम्बुधिवर्धनं प्रतिपदं पूर्णामृतास्वादनं
सर्वात्मस्नपनं परं विजयते श्रीकृष्णसंकीर्तनम्॥
Śrī Caitanya, *Śikṣāṣṭakam*, 1

[18] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974). pp. 552, 867

> Disciple: Nothing is gained, Mother, without the awakening of the *kuṇḍalinī.*
>
> Mother: Quite so, my child. The *kuṇḍalinī* will gradually be awakened. You will realize everything by the repetition of God's name. Even if the mind be not quiet, still you can sit at a place and repeat the holy Name a million times. Before the awakening of the *kuṇḍalinī*, one hears the *anāhata* sound; but nothing can be achieved without the grace of the Divine Mother.[19]
>
> At Koalpara a disciple said to the Holy Mother: 'Mother, the mind is very restless. I can steady it in no way.' In reply the Mother said: 'As the wind removes the cloud, so the name of God destroys the cloud of worldliness.' [20]
>
> The mind will be steadied if one repeats the name of God fifteen or twenty thousand times a day. It is truly so. O Krishnalal, I myself have experienced it. Let them practise it first: if they fail, let them complain. One should practise *japa* with some devotion, but this is not done. They will not do anything, they will only complain, saying 'Why do I not succeed?'[21]
>
> One must experience the result of *prārabdha karma*. No one can escape it. But *japa* or repetition of God's holy Name minimizes its intensity. It is like the case of a man who is destined to lose his leg, but instead suffers only from the prick of a thorn in his foot.[22]

Swami Brahmananda, one of the foremost of Sri Ramakrishna's disciples, laid great emphasis on *japa*. A disciple once asked him, 'Maharaj, how can the *kuṇḍalinī* be awakened?' Maharaj replied: 'According to some there are special exercises to awaken it. But I believe it can best be done through *japa* and meditation. The practice of *japa* is specially suited to our present age.'[23]

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[19] Swami Tapasyananda and Swami Nikhilananda, *Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1969), p. 401

[20] ibid., p. 405

[21] ibid., p. 398

[22] ibid., p. 423

[23] *The Eternal Companion,* op. cit., p. 275

On another occasion he said:

> *Japam-japam-japam!* Even while you work practise *japam.* Keep the name of the Lord spinning in the midst of all your activities. If you can do this, all the burning of the heart will be soothed. Many sinners have become pure and free and divine by taking refuge in the name of God. Have intense faith in God and in His name; know that they are not different.[24]

Why have we given all these quotations? What do all these show? These words of illumined souls show that there is great power in the divine Name. One must have faith in this power. Hundreds of thousands of people have attained spiritual progress through *japa*. It is an important spiritual discipline. The power of the Name is bound to make itself felt in the aspirant sooner or later. The divine Name counteracts the rising of bad thoughts in the mind. It is not possible to lead an absolutely pure life without constant repetition of the divine Name. I am speaking from my own actual experience in life. Let us therefore constantly repeat the divine Name. Let our body and mind become pure and vibrate with spiritual vibrations. Let the Name remove our obstacles and bring our soul in touch with the Oversoul, bring the Jīvātman in touch with the Paramātman. Let us learn to sing the music of the soul, the music that uplifts the soul and unites it with the supreme Spirit.

Some practical suggestions

First rise from the gross plane to the plane of thought and then try to rise to the spiritual plane. Before coming in touch with higher spiritual currents, the lower currents in us must be neutralized. When the lower vibrations are too strong, chant the divine Name with great vigour and tenacity. Our atmosphere is full of sound vibrations from various sources. These affect us even without our knowledge. If you listen to the music from a radio you can differentiate the effects of various types of music on you. Some music elevates you, some makes you restless, some just drives you mad. Learn to counteract bad music through *bhajan* and chanting of holy texts.

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[24] ibid., p. 297

Create your own inner music. In fact it is going on perpetually. You can listen to it when you properly tune your mind inward. The soul-enthralling melody of 'Kṛṣṇa's flute' can be heard within! That fills the soul with bliss and bathes the mind and body in peace.

Faith is most essential before taking up *japa*. It does not matter if, at first, *japa* becomes mechanical to some extent. But one must have faith in the power of the *mantra*. The beginner finds that his centre of consciousness is continually shifting — going up, coming down, and so on. This is most difficult for every aspirant. With infinite patience he should go on with his *japa* at regular hours whatever be the result at the beginning. This is the only way to achieve success in due course.

You must never allow yourselves to get into a drowsy state during your attempts at meditation or *japa*. This is most dangerous. Sleep, drowsiness and meditation should never be connected in any way. If you feel very drowsy, just get up and walk to and fro in the room while doing your *japa*, till this drowsiness leaves you. When the mind is awfully restless and outgoing, we should tenaciously persist in our *japa*, even do it mechanically, without giving in to this restlessness. That way, at least a part of our mind would be engaged in *japa*. Thus the whole mind cannot become or remain restless.

Along with each repetition of the Name of your *Iṣṭam* (the Chosen Deity) or of your *mantra* (mystic sound symbol of the Divine), imagine that your whole body, mind and senses are becoming purified. This faith must be made firm, because in a way this is the idea underlying *japa*. The *Iṣṭam's* Name soothes one's nerves, calms the mind and brings about helpful changes in the body. When the mind is in a state of great tension or depression, begin at once humming the Name and thinking of the Divine. Imagine that this is bringing about a balanced state, a new rhythm in the body and in the mind. Actually you will feel how it soothes the whole nervous system, how it stops the outgoing tendency of the mind more and more.

You may also practise rhythmic breathing before or along with *japa*. Rhythmic, regular breathing brings about calmness, a certain balance in the nervous system, and this again facilitates your spiritual practices. While doing your breathing exercises, try to give some strong suggestions to your mind: I am breathing in purity, breathing out all impurity. I am breathing in strength, breathing out all weakness. I am breathing in calmness, breathing out all restlessness. I am breathing in freedom, breathing out all bondage. These suggestions may be given even while doing your *japa*. They are very helpful in preparing the ground for real practice.

The holy thought brings about a certain harmony in the body and the mind. Think that with each repetition of your *mantra*, you are becoming purer and purer. You cannot know the effect of *japa* at once, but if you go on for sometime, steadily and persistently, you will feel it, and then after some years you will be astonished to find what a great change has come over you. There is a great scope for experiment. This body is to be polarized and made rhythmic, at least to some extent, and the nerves too, are to be polarized and made rhythmic. Through practice we must make the body, the mind, the breath, all of them, rhythmic. Then only can we come to have the proper mood for spiritual practices and meditation, and can do them in right earnest and in the proper way. Everything else belongs to the preliminary steps.

Everything is difficult in this path. Visualization is difficult, control of the mind is difficult and meditation is difficult. *Japa* too is difficult, if it is to be done properly, but a little less so. So new strength must be gained. And for this the suggestions mentioned are very helpful. Make use of the great power of sound and sound symbols. You must try to feel that the holy Name, the holy *mantra*, is purifying and elevating you. In due course you yourself will see that rhythmic repetition of the Name is the most essential part of spiritual practice in the life of a beginner.

Take the help of the sound symbol always, for sound and thought are interrelated. Thoughts manifest themselves in different sounds. Now we find that the divine Idea finds its expression in different holy Names, and there is an inseparable connection between the holy Idea and the sound. That is why we make use of the sound in our spiritual practice. It becomes easier for us to call up the holy thought with the help of the sound. We should see that we pass from the sound symbol to the Idea behind it, otherwise the sound does not help us. First comes external worship; the next spiritual practice to be taken up by every aspirant is *japa* and meditation; and finally comes the experience of the divine Being everywhere, with or even without closing one's eyes. This is the highest stage, and one can attain it only after having passed through all the previous ones, step by step.

Try to establish a definite relationship between the sound symbol and the holy Idea, so that the Idea comes up the very moment you touch the key of the sound symbol. As in the case of a typewriter, when you touch a key the corresponding letter is printed on the sheet, so the moment you touch your sound symbol, the corresponding idea should arise in you and come to your help. But, for this a very definite association between the two must be established through systematic daily practice.

Even if a great tempest is about to rise in your mind and sweep you off your feet, go on with your *japa*. If need be, repeat the holy Name aloud or at least to be audible to you. Very often in a very disturbed state, silent mental repetition is not enough. Audible sound checks the wandering mind. We should never minimize the effects of sound vibration. Our whole mind, even our body, responds to rhythmic chanting of the holy Name. *Japa* puts the mind in tune with higher cosmic vibrations. This calms, elevates and concentrates the mind. Some people keep up hours of loud *japa* and get considerable spiritual benefit. The same effect can be produced by repeating the *mantra* in the mind without any oral expression.

Sri Ramakrishna used to compare *japa* to a chain one end of which is tied to a heavy block immersed in a river. By holding to the chain, and moving forward link by link, you finally touch the block. In the same way, each repetition of the Name takes you nearer to God. The sound calls up knowledge and knowledge brings us in touch with the Divine. You should see that your *japa* becomes better and better in quality. You should do your *japa* consciously, intelligently, and have more and more of it as days pass. Always think of the chain and try to get hold of the next link. Thus you approach the Divine more and more, and prepare yourself for meditation.

Even when we seem to be swept away, let us try our best to hold on to the chain. Very often we magnify the danger that threatens us. Afterwards we find that we have been enlarging it too much with our vivid imagination. The situation may be bad but usually it is not so awful as we suppose. Very often it does not take such an awful turn as we imagine. And even if matters are really awful, why give up the struggle and allow yourself to be defeated without any resistance? Always go on with your *japa*, your prayer, in such cases, and try to meet the situation as well as you can. Even if you are defeated, your defeat will prove to be a stepping stone to success.

As a rule, one must dwell on the Form along with the repetition of some holy sound symbol, but when one is not in a meditative mood, one may just go on with *japa*, repeating the holy Name or *mantra* a thousand or two thousand times without any break. It does not matter even if it is a little mechanical. Practising this way, one may later on find meditation easier. Meditation is the extension of *japa*. *Japa* is meditation with breaks. In a way, meditation is *japa* without breaks and, of course, a more intensive process. In *japa* we have sound and thought with breaks, in meditation, thought alone without breaks. If we want to have meditation, we must first practise *japa*. You cannot make a sudden jump into meditation.

Every time your mind threatens to be out of balance, repeat the Name and try to think of the holy Form in the centre of your consciousness. Hold on to the sound and think of the meaning. If we are able to do this for some time, great steadiness will come. Then our muddled brain will become somewhat clearer, our thinking and feeling will become more definite. *Japa* removes many an obstacle and prepares the aspirant for meditation. Whether you feel inclined or not, do it, go on with it. Why should you stop it, merely because your mind does not feel inclined to do it? Why own defeat? Why be deceived by your own mind? Go on repeating the holy Name and think of the Ideal it represents, and never allow yourself to be defeated. Go on repeating it, so that your ear may hear the sound, and your mind may dwell on its meaning.

The power of the divine Name

In the beginning of spiritual life you need not bother about real meditation. Do *japa* and dwell on your *Iṣṭa Devatā*. In due course *japa* will develop into *dhyāna* which means unbroken thought on the theme for meditation like the unbroken current or flow of oil from one cup to another.

Through *japa* the divine Spirit will become more real than the world. And only then will real *dhyāna* become possible. Do the first thing first, and then the next step will come by itself.

Start doing *japa* in your own way.,By tuning oneself to the audible repetition of *Om*, one may gradually make it more silent and come in touch with what is called the Śabda Brahman of the Indian *ṛṣis* or 'the music of the spheres' of the ancient Pythagorean philosophers of Greece. Repeat the harmonious sound and know that it is a symbol — a manifestation of the supreme Spirit who is infinite Presence, Love and Bliss. By tuning your own 'radio set' properly you come in touch with the cosmic vibrations which will bring you in contact with the cosmic Mind, and through that the cosmic Spirit which is present everywhere and is the Soul of your soul, and the Soul of all souls.

By all means continue your *japa*. The holy *śakti-mantra* an aspirant receives has a tremendous power of removing obstacles and awakening the spiritual Consciousness. This really is the power of the Divine Mother of the universe, call Her Devī or Kālī, manifest in this age as Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna.

Sometimes it is very helpful if the aspirant touches one of the higher centres of his consciousness (heart, head, etc.) with his rosary or with his palm while doing *japa*. Feeling the centre physically makes it easier for him to fix his consciousness there.

The holy sound gives a sort of support to the mind. When there is any great trouble, one should try to be a little calm and introspective, and should pray to the Divine from the bottom of one's heart. Why allow yourself to be swept off your feet when any trouble arises? The moment you let go the 'chain', you are lost. When there is absolutely no help the Divine is the only help, and by the Divine we mean the supreme Spirit which dwells in us as the Soul of our souls. *Japa* is one of the most important forms of spiritual self-help. It takes us nearer and nearer to the Soul of our souls.

In our case *japa* is the only thing we can really do, and it is out of courtesy that we sometimes give it the name 'meditation'. There can be no question of doing anything higher like real meditation unless we prepare ourselves first through ethical culture, performance of duty, *japa,* prayers, regular readings from the holy books and trying to dwell on their meanings as much as possible. These preliminary practices help us in withdrawing the mind from the manifold distractions, and in making us dwell on holy thoughts, even though with breaks in the beginning. Later on, through persistent practice, we will be able to continue the thought current in an unbroken way.

As we become purer and purer in body and mind, in thought, word and deed, we will be able to have greater and greater concentration, and better meditation. And then, in course of time, we can come in touch with the Divine in both His personal and impersonal aspects. Then within our own hearts, we will feel the contact between the finite and the Infinite, between the soul and God — the Soul of our souls. Meditation thus attains its goal, the highest state of superconsciousness in which the soul comes in direct touch with the divine Reality — its true Self — and attains its natural perfection and freedom, peace and blessedness.

May the divine Name bring peace and blessedness to all!

CHAPTER 25

FORMLESS MEDITATION

Non-dualism is a far-off goal

There is a well-known Sanskrit verse which aptly expresses the true spirit of Hindu worship:

> O Lord, in my meditations I have attributed forms to Thee who art formless. O, Thou, Teacher of the world, by singing Thy glory I have contradicted the truth that Thou art beyond all speech. By describing Thee as specially manifested at places of pilgrimage and the like, I have denied Thy omnipresence. O, Lord of the universe, pray forgive me for this threefold fault of mutilation committed by me.[1]

All worship is undertaken with the basic assumption that behind all forms, beyond all names and symbols, shines the supreme Light which is without form and attributes. Spiritual life is like a staircase leading to the final experience of non-dualism which may be compared to the terrace. Since most of us are still on the staircase and not on the terrace, we should stress the steps very much now but always remembering that our goal is the terrace beyond all steps. Moreover, we should first of all know where on the staircase we actually stand.

Many people want to practise non-dualistic meditation, very often after reading a few books on Advaita. So many people talk about the Absolute. But what do they attain on the practical side? Most of them give up after a short while. They find they are getting nowhere. In the case of a few others, it may take them several months or even years of futile effort to understand that non-dualism is beyond their grasp. People forget that non-dualism is a state of actual experience. It is not what appeals to you intellectually that is important but what actually you can do. We should not attempt anything simply by reading books.

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[1] रूपं रूपविवर्जितस्य भवतो ध्यानेन यत्कल्पितं
स्तुत्यानिर्वचनीयताखिलगुरो दूरीकृता यन्मया।
व्यापित्वञ्च निराकृतं भगवतो यत्तीर्थयात्रादिना
क्षन्तव्यं जगदीश तद्विकलतादोषत्रयं मत्कृतम्॥
— Anonymous.

A dualist with a real spiritual experience is infinitely better than a monist without experience.

So long as we meditate, so long as there is meditation and the object of meditation even in the subtlest form, it is dualism. So we need not worry now about the One-without-a-second. We need not worry about getting merged in the One now. For most people it may even take millions of years to attain to that state.

The One behind the many

But it is most important to bring the One into the many. In the midst of all the multiplicity, we should not forget the One which is our ultimate goal. The Infinite, the Absolute, must form the background to the Forms of God we meditate on. In the path of devotion the aspirant concentrates his mind and feelings on his *Iṣṭa Devatā* or Holy Personality. The vast majority of people need the support of such holy Forms for their meditation. But they should not forget that all these divine Forms are only special manifestations of the absolute Principle. Both your soul and the Holy Personality are one in that absolute Principle which Vedānta calls Brahman, but the Holy Personality is a special manifestation of Brahman.

In the great Incarnations and prophets, you see a unique manifestation of divine purity, knowledge, love, etc. In the nucleus of our own small personalities also there is this same purity, knowledge, love, etc., but it is all covered with ignorance. Our personality is a combination of the true Self and the false self. The spark of light forgets its light nature and identifies itself with the cloud nature and then all the troubles and miseries of life arise. If you imagine that you are drowned in the infinite ocean of Consciousness, you will feel that your personality is something subtle that has become gross.

Types of formless meditation

However, instead of meditating on a holy Personality you may, if you like, meditate on a non-anthropomorphic symbol of the Divine, like the ocean or the sky or a vast area of light or space. This is meditation on the Formless, but remember this is not Monism, but is only a step to it. Meditating on an ocean of light and meditating on a holy Personality are dualistic meditations but the former is nearer to Monism than the latter. And I repeat: a dualist with experience is infinitely better than a monist without experience.

In formless meditation, think that both the vast mass of Light, your object of worship, and you, the small particle of light, are drowned in a vast, infinite ocean of Light. First we think more or less of the body alone, and there is only an indefinite idea of the principle of Consciousness standing at the back of ourselves, of everything. Then we begin to stress the principle of Consciousness more than the body and try to see the divine spark living in all bodies and giving life to them.

It is possible for a devotee to love the Formless as much as God with form. This is only a question of temperament. In this, there are three steps:

1. With form and with attributes (*sākāra, saguṇa*)
2. Without form but with attributes (*nirākāra, saguṇa*)
3. Without form and without attributes (*nirākāra, nirguṇa*)

In the course of our spiritual practice we must take a definite standpoint from where to proceed. There are some devotees who, in a certain mood, would turn to the form with attributes, and in another mood, to the formless with attributes. At every step we must be in touch with the Divine, whatever be our mood. It is this inner contact that is more important than the object of our meditation, with form or without form.

Sri Ramakrishna was very fond of a Sanskrit passage:

> When I think of myself as identified with the body, I am Thy servant, and Thou art my master, my will is controlled by Thy will; when I think of myself as a Jīva (individual soul) as distinct from the body, I am a part and Thou art the Whole; when I

recognize the spiritual Principle in me as distinct from body and mind and Jīva, I realize that I am one with Thee.[2]

The standpoint we adopt must be based on our actual experience. We should not go on changing our attitudes after reading books. A higher point of view may be appealing, but are we really able to apply it in practical life? That is the question.

There are some aspirants who are not satisfied with having only one form of meditation. They think of the infinite Ocean in which exist the worshipper and the Worshipped, like the bubble and the wave. The devotee thinks more of the Divine than of himself. Then he tries to think of the Principle in the object of worship and in himself. In the next step, the bubble and the wave, both get merged into the infinite Ocean.

So long as there is even the slightest clinging to personality, one passes through repeated births. When this clinging stops, the water particle becomes one with the ocean. But just now, we need not worry about getting merged in the ocean. That will take a very long time. When Swami Vivekananda was in America, a lady expressed to him her horror at the idea of getting merged in Brahman. Swamiji smiled at her and told her that there was no cause for such fear. When the drop of water reaches the ocean, the rays of the sun lift it up and bring it back to the earth. There is no imminent 'danger' of the soul's getting merged in Brahman.[3] For the vast majority of people it may even take millions of years to attain that. Till then they are born again and again to work among their fellowmen, to share their joys and sorrows.

Before we die, we must get at least some glimpses, and then move on. If in this life you do not succeed, begin again and again, move on life after life, till you reach the goal.

Begin with yourself first

Whether we practise meditation on a holy Personality or on the Formless, what is most important is to reduce our identification with our body. Some people denounce the worship of forms, the worship of 'clay images', but at the same time cling to their body. For many their own body is the most adorable thing in this world. This kind of body worship is the worst form of idolatry that there is. And yet so many people feel superior because they do not worship 'images of clay'! Some people are eager to analyze the nature of God but are not willing to analyze themselves! Before you apply the concept of formlessness or impersonality to God, apply it first to yourself. It is an important law that our concept of Reality depends upon our concept of ourselves. So in order to meditate on the formless God, we must first consider ourselves to be formless. We must depersonalize ourselves first before we try to depersonalize God. This most people won't do. That is why they very often get precious little out of their impersonal meditation. Many people in the name of formless meditation allow their minds to get into a torpid state. The attempt to remove all forms from the untrained mind usually results in sleep, or sometimes in allowing bad thoughts to take the place of good ones. So, in order to practise formless meditation, begin with yourself first. Look upon yourself as the Spirit, as the inner Light.

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[2] See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), pp. 32, 534, 652, 805.

[3] See Eastern and Western Disciples, *Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974), p. 351.

By trying to look at the body from inside and thinking of the Spirit animating it, our sense of personality is positively minimized even if thoughts and feelings do not disappear altogether. Again, try to apply this process of looking from within in the case of the forms which appear in the mind and create troubles. The outward form of ours as well as of others is associated with desires and passions which seem to disappear the moment we come to have the inward view. Face plays a great part in our body consciousness. We may look at the face also from within. It becomes easier for us to see the Divine in each form by approaching it in a spirit of veneration.

First, we have got to develop the personality and then we must dissolve it, as it were, into the Impersonal. Out of this Impersonal will then arise a pure personality, always conscious of and dependent on its origin. That is our higher Self. It is that which becomes a true instrument of the Divine.

We must learn to think in terms of the soul. Never stress the body aspect. Never think of yourself as a man or a woman. Just blast this rotten sense of personality, this meaningless egotism of ours, by bombarding it with some of the grand passages from Śaṁkara, like:

> I am neither the mind nor the intellect, neither the ego nor the mind-stuff, neither the sense of hearing, taste, smell, touch or sight, nor am I the elements of earth, fire or air. I am of the nature of pure consciousness and bliss. I am the supreme Self, I am the supreme Self.[4]
>
> I am neither male nor female nor neuter. I am the beneficent Being, the Light supreme.[5]
>
> I am neither a human being, nor a god, nor a demi-god. I am neither a Brahmin, nor a Kṣatriya, nor a Vaiśya, nor a Śūdra. I am neither a student nor a householder nor a forest-dweller nor a monk, I am the Self, the infinite Consciousness.[6]

Go on repeating sincerely 'I am Brahman', 'I am Brahman.'

States of consciousness

The body may be the centre of our consciousness. The mind may be the centre of our consciousness. The little soul may be the centre of our consciousness. The Infinite may be the centre of our consciousness. And our whole attitude, all our actions and thoughts depend upon what centre of consciousness we have chosen, and where we have our centre of gravity.

We have got two forms of consciousness. We make the soul the centre of our consciousness and feel the Infinite in that; or we make the Infinite the centre of our consciousness and feel the soul as a manifestation of this Infinite. Making our soul the centre of consciousness, we feel the Infinite like a circle all around it; or making the Infinite the centre of our consciousness, we feel that the soul is like a point existing in It. Every soul is like a point, and God is like an infinite ocean of Light joining every point of the circle. In the beginning all this may be an imagination but ultimately it becomes an experience.

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[4] मनोबुद्ध्य हङ्कारचित्तानि नाहं न च श्रोत्रजिह्वे न च घ्राणनेत्रे।
न च व्योम भूमिर्न तेजो न वायुश्चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम्॥
Nirvāṇa Ṣaṭkam, 1

[5] . . . पुमान् नैव न स्त्री तथा नैव षण्डः प्रकृष्टः प्रकाशस्वरूपः शिवोऽहम्॥
Nirvāṇa Mañjarī, 1

[6] नाहं मनुष्यो न च देवयक्षौ न ब्राह्मणक्षत्रियवैश्यशूद्राः।
न ब्रह्मचारी न गृही वनस्थो भिक्षुर्न चाहं निजबोधरूपः॥
Hastāmalaka Stotram, 2

We should try to remain in one of these three spiritual moods:

1. Dwelling on the Unity, merging the individuality in It.
2. Identifying oneself with the Infinite and then feeling the personality only as Its manifestation.
3. Thinking of oneself as an individual, and then feeling the presence of the immanent, all-pervading Principle, the Soul of our soul, on whom the soul is fully dependent.

So long as the ego persists, let us be connected with the infinite Divine as in 2 and 3. Let the ego be never allowed to be more real than the infinite Self.

In order to strengthen the sense of unity, you may repeat some of the monistic meditations already referred to. Try to soar step by step. From the holy Form with the noblest attributes rise to the Formless with attributes. From that move to the pure Being, without form and without attributes.

And when you come back, do so in the reverse order. If you do that you will find that the soul always gets the divine support and connection even when body consciousness becomes strong.

Impersonal meditation

You may also practise any one of the following types of formless meditations:

1. The aspirant imagines he is a fish swimming in the one undivided and eternally indivisible ocean of Existence-Knowledge-Bliss, without any obstruction whatsoever.
2. The aspirant imagines he is a bird flying in the infinite sky without anything to stand in its way anywhere.

3. The aspirant is like a pot fully immersed in water — water inside and water outside.
4. The aspirant imagines himself to be a point of self-conscious light immersed in the one indivisible ocean of Light.

You identify yourself with the point of light; then you feel it to be a part of an infinite sphere of light. Finally, make your point of light expand, or make it merge in the vast light, or let it move anywhere. But everywhere nothing but light is left. This is a wonderful form of meditation.

A little study of astronomy gives us a sense of the vast. We cannot think of the Infinite, but we can think of the vast, and then slowly go on making it bigger and bigger. Think about the vastness of space and the inconceivable sizes of stars and galaxies. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* it is said:

> The Infinite dwells in all the stars and planets. It is inside them and outside them and the same Infinite is in human beings too.[7]

Instead of thinking of the finite, the little, the petty, the small, it is better to think of the vast, the infinite, the stars, the solar system, the Milky Way, and the nebulae which are new star systems in the process of formation. And then dissolve everything — this earth, the sky, the solar systems, everything — in the Infinite, undivided ocean of Light.

In the well-known *Puruṣa-Sūkta*, one of the most ancient and sacred hymns of the Hindus, the Vedic *ṛṣi* says: 'All this manifested universe forms only a fragment of the divine glory.' [8] Such a small bit after all!

Whenever our mind shrinks as a result of dwelling on small, petty, mean, trifling things, we should try to think such elevating thoughts. Think of the vastness of the sky, of the vastness of the innumerable solar systems. But see that you think of the Divine in such manifestations — the Divine in nature, the Divine in the sky — not of nature as the Divine.

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[7] यश्चन्द्रतारके तिष्ठंश्चन्द्रतारकादान्तरः यं चन्द्रतारकं
न वेद, यस्य चन्द्रतारकं शरीरम्, यश्चन्द्रतारकमन्तरो
यमयति, एष त आत्मान्तर्याम्यमृतः ॥
Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.7.11

[8] एतावानस्य महिमातो ज्यायांश्च पूरुषः ।
पादोऽस्य विश्वा भूतानि . . . ॥
Ṛg-Veda, 10.90.3

Sometimes for our concentration we need some definite forms, either anthropomorphic or non-anthropomorphic. Otherwise concentration is not possible for most people. Without a definite form for an object, we are not able to fix our mind and have it concentrated. Most people are not at any rate able to do so.

So, for concentration, something definite, something finite is necessary. In this case, the choice of a finite form is a question of temperament. When we become adepts in concentration, let us try to meditate on the Infinite that dwells in the finite. If you are able to connect the Infinite and the finite, and look upon the finite as a manifestation of the Infinite, that meditation is something very grand, but the finite must never be taken as the Divine. The aspirant has to see the Divine standing at the back of all finite forms, but he should not take the finite forms as the Divine. In the first case he stresses the Divine, in the second he stresses the form, which is very dangerous and leads to delusion. When we meditate upon the finite as manifestation of the Infinite, we have both intensity and extensity. Such a meditation is very grand if done in the proper way.

In the midst of all these meditations we should not forget the most important fact of our being souls. Whether we meditate on a finite form or on the Formless we should look upon ourselves as souls. And we should always remember that the Divine is more real and vaster than the soul. As Śaṁkarācārya says:

> O Lord, it is the waves that get merged in the ocean and not the ocean in the waves. So, when all limitations are removed from me, it is I who become merged in Thee, and not Thou in me.[9]

Be absorbed in the Self

In the higher states of spiritual consciousness the aspirant forgets the phenomenal world altogether. In *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* this idea is conveyed by the example of a hunter aiming at a bird. The hunter was so much absorbed in his work that he was not conscious of a noisy bridal procession which went by.[10]

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[9] See Chapter 21, footnote 27.

It is a fundamental law in spiritual life that whatever we take to be real draws our whole energy, our intellect, thoughts and actions. If we take this world to be real, we become preoccupied with it. The scientist is intensely preoccupied with abstract ideas of the universe. If you want to turn to spiritual life, this world should cease to be more real than the Spirit. One cannot be even a dualist unless one believes that God is more real than the whole world. Even the dualist regards the world as of a lower order of reality than the Divine. The Divine alone is eternal and immortal. No religion gives to the world the same status of reality as to the Divine.

Monism asserts right from the beginning that the world is unreal and that the Divine alone is the only reality. Dualism begins by taking the world to be real and then tries to seek God who gives reality to it. However, when superconsciousness dawns upon the aspirant, whether he began as a dualist or a monist, the phenomenal world disappears from his consciousness. Dualism and Monism are terms which refer to the relationship between the soul and the Divine. This is an important point to note. Whether the world is real or unreal is not the point in question. What is more important is to stress the greater reality of the Divine and establish contact with It.

How to connect our individuality with the Divine? How to connect the part with the Whole? This is our task in spiritual life. And to the extent we succeed in doing that, to that extent we become more spiritual, illumined, free.

The secret lies in changing one's concept of oneself. If we identify ourselves with our bodies, then this world and everything connected with it come to us as a matter of course. The Divine becomes real to us only when we regard ourselves as souls. How to counteract the thought that we are bodies, that we are men and women, that we are doers and enjoyers? Raise a strong contrary thought current. Make this so intense and vivid that all other wrong thoughts fade away. Every spiritual aspirant, whether he is philosophically a monist or a dualist, must do this. He must regard himself as the self-luminous Ātman, unattached to body and mind. He should reflect deeply on this truth until it sinks deep into his personality and transmutes his outlook on life.

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[10] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., p. 721

The secret of attaining purity lies here. The Ātman is eternally pure and is our real nature. Without realizing our true nature we cannot attain real purity, however much we may try. In fact, it is the identification of the Ātman with the mind, the senses, and the body that is the very basis of all impurity.

By thinking of the Ātman we become the Ātman

The mind is not something conditioned once for all by heredity. Its nature is dynamic and can be changed by proper discipline. It has the tendency to record every form of experience that passes through it until the recorded part becomes our nature, so to speak. By thinking about a bad person we imbibe his attributes and become bad ourselves. By meditating on a holy Personality we imbibe His purity and virtues and become holy ourselves. This is a psychological law operating in all human beings. This law was discovered in India long ago and has become the basis of all types of spiritual meditations. Even the monist recognizes the value of thus transforming the mind by dwelling on the nature of the higher Self. So you find the follower of the path of *jñāna* meditating on the great Upaniṣadic dicta like 'That thou art' and 'I am Brahman', or on the stanzas describing the non-dual experience written by Śaṁkara and other masters.

By intensely concentrating the mind on the nature of the real Self, one can awaken in oneself the forgotten memory of the Self. But intensity of concentration should be there. The whole mind should flow towards the goal aimed at. However, this is not possible unless we have previously purified our mind and brought about a total change in our outlook on the phenomenal world. Without intense dispassion for the world and its pleasures, one cannot turn one's whole mind towards the Ātman.

The mind in the case of ordinary people is restless. It is being continually drawn out in different directions by the sense objects and is itself driven hither and thither by impulses and desires. Whatever excuses we may put forward for our actions, we have to admit the power of attachment to sense objects. A man who is perfectly unattached to the world can instantly turn his whole mind towards the Ātman. By constant meditation he realizes that he is the Ātman, and not the mind or the body.

In the *Bhāgavatam* the above idea is conveyed through the lesson that an Avadhūta (wandering monk) learnt from a cockroach and a wasp.[11] It is well known that the wasp carries cockroaches, caterpillars, spiders, etc. to its nest after paralyzing them with its sting. It then lays eggs near these helpless victims and seals the nest. The grubs that hatch from the eggs eat the insects and grow into wasps. The whole cycle of a wasp's life was not probably discovered in India but the presence of cockroach etc. in its nest was well known, and this had given rise to the popular belief that the cockroach, by intensely meditating on the wasp, became the wasp itself. This forms the basis of the parable of 'the wasp and the cockroach' widely used in Hindu literature.

This does not mean that this kind of meditation on the Self is a kind of auto-suggestion. Though the Reality is beyond the experience of the ordinary man's mind, it can be directly realized by the purified mind. Hence meditation in this case is not on the unreal but on the Real. Meditation only prevents the rising of thoughts contrary to the Truth which shines by Itself. The Ātman is self-luminous and ever present behind all our thoughts. When the thoughts are stilled through concentration, and the ignorance covering the Ātman is destroyed, the Self shines forth.

The double process of worship and analysis

Ordinarily, our thought life and physical life imply complete identification with our gross body and our subtle body, and since it is not possible for us to get rid of this false identification all of a sudden, we should at least see that we minimize it as much as possible, and try to lessen this false identification more and more as we proceed towards the goal.

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[11] *Bhāgavatam,* 11.9.23

The trouble is that at the back of all our emotions there is this idea that we are men and women, that we are personalities and individuals. At the same time, we also feel that we are spiritual aspirants or devotees of God. But this feeling can be made a means of transcending the idea of personality. We may keep the idea that we are aspirants or devotees and may worship a male or female Deity. But along with this idea a certain amount of self-analysis is absolutely necessary, for even the idea of the aspirant and the devotee is, ultimately, a false conception.

Since we are not able to follow the path of out-and-out self-analysis, we must follow the mixed path. We should worship the Divine, looking upon ourselves as devotees, and also try to analyze our personality into the Self and the non-Self, consisting of gross and subtle bodies, and then try to identify ourselves with the Self, drawing ourselves away from the non-Self. This is the double process of worship and analysis to be followed by all.

For concentration, most of us need a personal divine Ideal or a holy Personality (*Iṣṭa Devatā*) but, side by side with our meditation on the Chosen Ideal, we should also try to think of and meditate upon the Principle of which this holy Personality is a manifestation. Thus we learn to combine meditations on the personal and the impersonal aspects of the Divine. Over and above this, we should have also monistic meditations in which we try to separate our Self from all that is not-Self — our bodies, gross and subtle. This course is to be followed by all, and it is very essential that we do this time and again.

It is also very essential that we have a fixed set of meditations every day, theistic and monistic ones, and these meditations are to be read and repeated every day without any break or change. I do not know whether this is being done or not, but we should make it a point to do it scrupulously as part of our practices. It is a very necessary item of our *sādhanā* (spiritual practice). If on any day one finds one's body consciousness, one's individuality, becoming stronger than usual, then one must meditate on some scriptural passages, especially monistic ones, more than ever. One must have more of meditation even if one's mind tries to rebel. We should constantly repeat and remember certain important ideas, some fixed passages again and again. This is far better than having new readings every time. Some of the ideas must be driven deep into us through repeated practice.

So, during the distresses and afflictions that come from the phenomenal world, we should consciously try to draw ourselves away from them and move towards the Divine in us. Drawing away from the external world is essential for every really spiritual person, whether he turns all the more towards the Divine or not. What worldly people do is just the opposite. Without trying to separate themselves from the phenomenal world through discrimination, they try to move towards God. It is not enough if we are able to separate the little personality from our body and mind, but we should try to connect the finite self with the Infinite, the individual with the Universal. This is all we can do for the present, as the transcendental, the Absolute, the One-without-a-second, is too far off and cannot be reached by us for many, many years to come.

We become purer and purer to the extent our identification with our body becomes less and less; and to the extent we become purer, to that extent our identification with our body also becomes less. These two—purification and detachment — go side by side; it is a case of parallel growth, and not of a vicious circle. And to the extent our identification with the body is lessened and the process of purification intensified, to that extent we move towards Self-realization.

In one of the Upaniṣads there is this passage:

> Making oneself the lower churning piece and *Om* the upper churning piece, and rubbing them together through the practice of meditation, one should see the Lord in His hidden reality.[12]

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[12] स्वदेहमरणिं कृत्वा प्रणवं चोत्तरारणिम् ।
ध्याननिर्मथनाभ्यासाद्देवं पश्येन्निगूढवत् ॥
Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 1.14

That is, one must go on steadily and perseveringly with one's *japa*, at the same time concentrating one's mind on the Self. This is the double process of worship and self-analysis.

Knowledge as thought, removes ignorance, and then that knowledge disappears. Knowledge gives the aspirant the true idea of the individual self and the true idea of the universal Self, and then brings about their perfect union. After that, it ceases to be, and the Absolute is reached in which there is no knower, knowledge or the known. Pure, infinite Consciousness alone remains.

The devotee, who is dualistic in his approach, tries to connect his self with God; the non-dualist tries to have extreme form of analysis in which all that is non-Divine is eliminated, and the Divine is realized. Both try to deny the ego, to eliminate it, but in different ways. The devotee says, 'I am nothing, Thou art everything.' The non-dualist says, 'My personality is nothing, the Infinite is everything.' There is a Sanskrit passage conveying this idea:

> Some people worship Thee saying, 'I am Thine', some others do it saying, 'I am Thou alone'. In spite of this little difference in attitudes the final result of both is the same.[13]

So, really speaking, the infinite 'Thou' is the same as this infinite 'I'. Both lead to the same ultimate Realization, only the way of expressing it is different; so also is the approach.

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[13] तवास्मीति भजत्येकः त्वमेवास्मीति चापरः ।
इति किञ्चित् विशेषोऽपि परिणामः समोद्वयोः ॥
Narahari, *Bodhasāra*

CHAPTER 26

PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Keeping the mind on a higher plane

In spiritual life it is not enough if we spend one or two hours in the morning and evening in meditation. Something of the meditative mood must be maintained throughout the day. There must be an undercurrent of thought about the Divine even when we are engaged in our daily duties of life. This prevents the rising of impure thoughts and greatly helps in concentration when we sit down for meditation. Practice of the presence of God must supplement our daily meditations and, if done properly, it is, by itself, an intense spiritual practice. It is equal to several hours of meditation done without concentration.

In the second chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa about the characteristics of a liberated man.[1] What is the purpose of this sort of cataloguing the characteristics of a perfect devotee which you find repeated in many places in this book and also in other spiritual texts? Śaṁkara in his commentary on the second chapter of the *Gītā* explains this point. He says that the characteristics of a liberated man are to be regarded as the virtues or disciplines to be practised by the imperfect. What is a strenuous discipline for the struggling soul is an embellishment to the perfect. Hence the importance of knowing the conduct and character of an advanced soul.

The main point to note in all these instructions is the importance of keeping the mind on a higher plane always. The mind should never be allowed to come down; this happens when you forget the supreme Ideal and get absorbed in worldly affairs. Since works and duties are unavoidable, these are to be converted into means for keeping contact with the Divine. Unless one does it, a little *japa* and meditation done in the morning and evening do not help much. We should remember the Lord always and the only way of doing this is to connect everything we do and think, to the Divine. It is very dangerous to let the mind remain vacant, or to brood over the past. If we allow the mind to remain unoccupied, it will go on thinking useless thoughts, brooding over past experiences. All these do no good to anybody.

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[1] *Bhagavad-Gītā* 2.54

If you get into such a mood, at once take up reading some good book or do some selfless service to somebody. You will find that that mood will soon pass. Otherwise, if you just sit and brood over the past, you will not only waste time but also produce self-created obstacles. The importance of serious studies in religious life can never be over-emphasized. They are very important for most of the aspirants. It is presumptuous to think that studies are no longer necessary for you, that you can attain everything through your meditation. Meditation no doubt helps in opening up the higher centres. But all the mental and vital energies cannot be made to flow through these higher centres. A large quantity of surplus energy is left at the lower centres and if this is not channelized through some creative work, it may lead to unnecessary disturbance of the mind. Studies and selfless work should be looked upon as a form of spiritual practice. They should form a part of any comprehensive scheme of spiritual life. They should not be left out as unnecessary or useless. If you are able to do something creative at other times, you will never feel the monotony of life. Otherwise, especially for the beginners, spiritual life itself may become an intolerable monotony.

Our spiritual life is to be judged by the type and frequency of the thought of the Divine that arises in our mind in the course of the day. Just sitting down for an hour's meditation once or twice a day is not enough. In the midst of our daily work and duties the thought of God must constantly bubble up. That is real spiritual life. Otherwise you remain spiritual only for an hour or two a day. The rest of the time you are no different from an ordinary worldly person.

But of course this needs conscious struggle for a long time. Unpleasant situations and people cannot be avoided and these disturb our mind. So you must learn to connect them also to the Divine. Find some place for the so-called wicked people and unfortunate circumstances in the larger plan of divine existence. Then usually you will discover that the people don't look wicked, nor the situations so unfortunate, after all. Through steady practice you will be able to throw your ego into the background, bring the Divine to the forefront, and make Him dominate your thought life. It is the clinging to our little self or ego that is the major problem in spiritual life. This should be attenuated. It is your attitude towards yourself that is perhaps the greatest obstacle to your spiritual progress — not so much other people and circumstances.

Continuity of practice

Through practice you will be able to repeat the Lord's name, or chant a hymn or prayer and think of Him, while your hands are busy with work. It is in this way that you will be able to transform work into worship, and be nearer to God.

Prayer and meditation at fixed hours are most essential for spiritual progress. But that is not enough. Something of the prayerful and meditative mood is to be continued during the period of work also. It is then that work attempted to be done in the spirit of consecration becomes a form of spiritual practice, as much effective as prayer and meditation. Says a Hindu hymn, 'All that I do, O Lord, is Thy worship.' *

Be very particular about your regular prayer and meditation, but also carry a little of the holy thought with you throughout the day. To the extent you succeed in filling up your idle moments with the Lord's name and thought, a tremendous spiritual transformation will take place in you and you will be feeling the divine Presence, Love and Bliss in your heart more and more.

Do not feel anxious about the ups and downs which are inevitable for those who are following the spiritual path. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that tides are experienced in a river only when it is nearing the ocean. You should not worry about your moods. The mind has its ups and downs. But, as you go

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* See Chapter 17, footnote 14.

on steadily with your *japa* and meditation and feel the presence of the One who never changes, you will have greater stability. Besides, your power of thinking and introspection also will increase.

After a little *japa* and meditation, attend to your duties, but have something of the feeling that the infinite Spirit dwells in your heart as the Soul of your soul, just as He dwells in all beings. Think also that you and everybody else dwell in Him.

Proceed in this way and you will be able to feel more and more of the heart centre, the point of contact between your soul and the infinite Spirit. This in due course will give you great mental and physical stability.

Inner contact with the Divine

Every spiritual aspirant must have a definite centre of consciousness, a holy Form (*Iṣṭa Devatā*) and a holy Name (*mantra*) for constant use. Further, just like the mariner's compass which constantly points towards the north, our mind must be fixed always on the holy Form and the holy Name in our centre of consciousness. Every *sādhaka* must have a definite higher spiritual centre for his consciousness. He must learn to remain in his centre of consciousness always. This he can do easily if during his morning meditation he succeeds in fixing his mind there. If he is able to locate his real 'I' there, it is easier for him to connect his objective consciousness to this central consciousness. The aspirant should see that he is always rooted deep in his centre of consciousness. If our mind is uprooted from this spiritual centre, it tends to strike roots somewhere else and this can be very unsettling. Those who follow the path of *jñāna*, always try to hold on to the central 'I'-consciousness through constant self-analysis. They remain more balanced and do not feel long gaps of spiritual 'dryness'.

The *bhakta's* case is different. He gives more importance to the form of his *Iṣṭa Devatā*, and when he cannot remember Him he feels miserable. Those who follow the path of devotion should learn to connect their individual consciousness with the consciousness of their *Iṣṭam*. When you do not feel the living presence of your *Iṣṭam*, your own consciousness loses its base and you feel as if you were floating in the air without any support. Sometimes the aspirant succeeds in making the form of his *Iṣṭam* very vivid during his meditation, but he finds that he is unable to establish a proper contact with it, he is unable to connect his consciousness with that of the *Iṣṭam*. This brings profound disturbance, and often a prolonged unsettlement. For days together the aspirant lives in a sort of emotional vacuum.

If temporarily you feel out of touch with your *Iṣṭa Devatā*, please do not lose heart. Go on praying and doing your spiritual exercises and also your reading of scriptures. Wait with inner intensity; the inner contact will be restored — and more deeply than before.

Actually our souls are always in contact with the Divine, but since we are in the domain of the unconscious, we don't feel it. Our impurities, inner impulses and fantasies keep us from rising to a higher plane of consciousness where we can easily feel the divine contact. Hence the great importance attached to the purification of mind in spiritual life.

The main problem for modern people is that they don't feel intense love for their *Iṣṭam*, and have not succeeded in establishing a proper relationship with Him. If there is true love for the Divine, the love tends to be expressed in work. Every form of work becomes an expression of the aspirant's adoration for the Divine.

Overactivity an obstacle

There are some people who want to save the world without even knowing how to save themselves! Without solving your own problems you cannot solve those of the world. This is the trouble with most fanatical reformers; they do not really know anything of themselves and yet they want to reform others. Such is our perverse nature that we go on multiplying work until it absorbs all our attention and energy. We should not multiply our duties unnecessarily. We should not run after work. We need a certain amount of leisure. We should always find time for our spiritual exercises and our devotions.

Overactivity is an obstacle in spiritual life. Again and again we come across the tendency in people to multiply work, especially in the West with its restlessness and aimless passion. Sri Ramakrishna always used to discourage the tendency in certain people to increase work, to increase their duties.[2] It is an unbalanced mentality. It just shows restlessness and an attempt at escape. It is nothing praiseworthy. No human being can achieve anything without leisure well used. Most overactive people lack balance, have an abnormal psychology. The activity of a monkey intoxicated by alcohol and stung by a scorpion is nothing wonderful, and the activity of these people is just the same sort of half-mad, random activity, activity for activity's sake. Then they come and complain, 'Where is the time to do my spiritual practices? If only I had time!' etc., etc. Restlessness is as bad as lethargy. Passion is as bad as dullness. So activity of this kind is nothing to make a song about. And duty in such cases is just an excuse. Very often duty is self-created as an excuse for one's own restlessness and lack of balance. We want to run away from ourselves and go on multiplying duties so that we can have a comfortable excuse for ourselves and for others. Real duty is something very different. Unnecessary social functions are everywhere for worldly-minded people. There is a lot of impurity in them. Never create such unnecessary work that does no good to yourselves or to others.

Those who have to struggle hard for their animal existence find it hard to turn to the Divine. Those who can do so in spite of this struggle are very rare. Everyone needs leisure well employed. Always try to do the Lord's work through prayer, *japa*, meditation and deep studies, and other forms of spiritual practice. Try to have as much time as possible for these. Work should be done with perfect detachment and should be looked upon as a means, not as an end.

The instrument also acts, and we should have the idea that we are instruments in the hands of the Lord while we act. Then our whole attitude will change, and our work too will become a part of spiritual practice, of service to the Lord. Work is always to be directed towards the Lord. This must be our conscious attitude whatever work we may happen to do. Thereby certain kinds of work will have to be eliminated. The *Bhāgavatam* says:

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[2] See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), pp. 72, 406-7, 641, etc.

> That person is really dead though alive whose activity in this world does not tend towards *dharma* and thereby to renunciation and to the hallowed feet of the Divine (Hari).[3]

Work and worship

At first the aspirant may feel some difference between work and worship, though he carries on both in a spirit of surrender. Then he finds that he is able to carry on his inner worship even in the midst of all his duties. Finally, all his work becomes a worship. At first we must make our activities as selfless as possible by offering the fruits of our work to the Divine. Later on we learn to work as instruments in His hands. Our whole life then becomes one of undivided consecration.

Work and worship must go hand in hand. Both effect the purification of our mind and help in the unfoldment of higher consciousness. They are to be looked upon as a twofold spiritual discipline, inseparable from each other.

No man or woman should neglect his or her duties in the name of meditation. If we work remembering the Lord all the while, we may not need so much of private meditation. What is most important is that the aspirant should always be in touch with the Divine in some form or other. One of the best means of achieving this is to repeat the *mantra* mentally even while engaged in routine work. Let the wheel of *japa* continuously turn within us, as Swami Brahmanandaji has advised us.[4] Always take the help of the sound symbol. Fill up your idle moments with the name of the Lord.

Whenever any opportunity for service arises, we should take it up, and that ungrudgingly; otherwise the soul shrinks. Do not seek more work, but render service if there is any occasion. We grow through giving, not through receiving. The receiver must be a giver, the giver of something. Never allow yourselves to become beggarly. Be detached but be fully sympathetic. Render help wherever you can, but without attachment, realizing that you are not the agent.

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[3] नेह यत्कर्म धर्माय न विरागाय कल्पते ।
न तीर्थपदसेवायै जीवन्नपि मृतो हि सः ॥
Bhāgavatam, 3.23.56

[4] Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1965), p. 181

Sometimes we think that if we try to help others spiritually that would be posing as a *guru*. That is not true if there is no feeling of vanity or superiority in us. It is service, and we should never allow ourselves to shrink from such service when the opportunity or need for rendering it arises.

In order to convert work into worship, first of all, one should try to culture the spiritual mood with *japa* and meditation. When a person takes up a work, he cannot think of God all the time; so let him remember Him at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the work, thinking that he is doing the work as a form of service to Him in order to please Him. As one succeeds in taking this first step, one can remember the Lord often even in the midst of work.

The mind has got two currents, the upper one and the lower one. Usually the lower one is filled with useless thoughts. This undercurrent of the mind can be trained to think of the Lord, as one performs the work allotted to one and remembering at the same time that one is working for His sake. This prevents the work from becoming mechanical, and also prevents the mind from being occupied with worldly thoughts.

Sometimes due to force of circumstances one has to do an excess of work, but if one's mind is properly trained, one can still find it possible to think of God even in the midst of intense activity. For this, regular preliminary discipline is necessary.

Now, how to make the mind feel convinced that the Lord is the only doer? Through work and worship you must first realize the presence of the Lord, the Soul of your soul, and then you can easily feel His will and His power that is working through your body and mind and through everything in this universe.

This takes us to the ideal of dedication. The word means offering one's soul, mind and body to the supreme Spirit, praying to be an instrument in His hands for serving His cause, and trying to promote the welfare of all and along with that striving for the salvation of one's own self. The central idea should be to love and serve God in man, and thus realize the highest goal of human existence. The service may be physical, intellectual, moral or spiritual according to the needs of those who come in close touch with us.

As I have already said, along with work, one must also think of the Lord and offer all activities to Him. They alone become mechanical who forget the Lord and the goal of attaining Him, and work like machines. The trouble is not so much with the quantity of work as with the inability to do it in a spirit of dedication to God. There cannot be any dedication unless the goal of Self-realization is kept constantly in view and the little ego is sacrificed and merged in the divine Consciousness. The person who says that in dedication one has to sacrifice everything and obey others whether right or wrong, has not understood the spirit of dedication, or even if he has, is not able to express the ideal properly. As one succeeds in practising real dedication the ego is not so much killed as transformed. The individual consciousness is united with the divine Consciousness and the individual will becomes one with the divine Will; one even feels that one's body is a part of the cosmic Body; such a person can never become mechanical. On the contrary, he leads a cosmo-centric life instead of an egocentric one.

Whatever be the nature of the work you may be doing, think that you are doing everything as a form of service to the Lord who dwells in you, in everybody. In the eighteenth chapter of the *Gītā*, Lord Kṛṣṇa says that one can attain spiritual illumination by worshipping the supreme Spirit with one's duty.[5] Any honest work, however humble, may be looked upon as a form of service to the Lord and thus can be performed with detachment.

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[5] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 18.46

Intensity needed

There are three kinds of activity: unconscious activity without any definite aim; conscious activity with a definite aim; and the activity carried on with a higher form of consciousness along with ordinary consciousness. And we should never stop short of the third one. We should learn to work without losing contact with higher consciousness. Here no new capacity for work is created, but the old one is given a new and better turn. Nothing new is brought in from outside, but there is a new inner awareness, which is our own inherent nature.

Through intense spiritual effort we can create an undercurrent in the mind which flows on towards the Divine even when the rest of the mind is engaged in work. Thus there are two currents flowing in the mind. Such a conscious splitting of the mind is possible and is essential for the continuity of spiritual life. Through steady spiritual practice we will be able to have a larger part of our mind under control, and the more we can do this, the more efficiently can we divide our mind into two, and the more efficiently can we practise the presence of God in the midst of all our duties. Ordinarily, the undercurrent is an unconscious stream filled with all sorts of useless things. What we have got to do in meditation is to try to make the upper current and the undercurrent one. And then during work, the undercurrent should be made to flow along some higher channel, along some higher constructive lines, as much as possible. We must modify the contents of the lower current. We must bring them to the conscious plane. When we do this, we get a good portion of our mind at our command and, at the same time, we come to have a more intense and wide-awake mind. This is an important discipline in the life of a spiritual aspirant. Spiritual life means more and more of mental awakening, i.e. the awakening of the higher mind, ultimately leading to the attainment of superconsciousness.

Just study your mind and its movements dispassionately while doing your work. Watch it and see how it is busying itself with all sorts of useless and sometimes even harmful things. You can then have conscious control over the mind to a great extent, and through steady and prolonged practice you will find that the brain fibres have, as it were, become lighter and have lost much of their resistance. Both physical and psychical obstructions are to be counteracted as much as possible to clear the way to the goal of superconsciousness.

Sharing with others

We try to gain something for ourselves and then try to share it with others. At the beginning, greater stress may be laid on our own inner growth, but the welfare of others is not to be lost sight of. First of all we must have an amount of preparation, otherwise we cannot even serve others efficiently. Let us first strive to be divine ourselves, and then help others to be divine. But these two must go together. When one has promoted one's own spiritual progress to some extent, only then can one work for others and that, in an efficient way. When Swami Vivekananda said, 'I do not care for my own salvation' [6], he had attained his salvation already. After having attained the highest spiritual state, he worked for others.

If the Lord keeps us in a higher mood and gives us the strength to do His service, let us go in for it. This form of service takes us nearer the goal. Sometimes one has to remain in a higher mood not only for one's own sake but also for the sake of others. This serves as an additional impetus to spiritual practice. Unless you have something, what are you going to give? So, sometimes not out of our own earnestness but out of necessity we have to gather more, because more is to be distributed.

This is the ideal for all of us: to try to promote our own welfare as well as that of others. And really speaking, the two can never be separated. Through service there comes the sense of unity more and more. To the extent the sense of ego is stressed less, the sense of unity asserts itself more and more, and finally we come to realize the Divine in all men and women, in the whole outer and inner world.

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[6] Eastern and Western Disciples, *Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974), p. 487

Change of attitude towards the world

Even before this unity is actually attained one has to feel it, imagine it in the course of one's *sādhanā* (spiritual practice). Without the help of a vivid imagination of Reality, work may become dangerous. When you work in the world, you have to move and live with people. It is therefore essential that you establish a spiritual outlook in the beginning. So the aspirant must take the help of imagination. Patañjali says in his *Yoga-Sūtras:* 'To obstruct the thoughts which are inimical to Yoga, contrary thoughts should be brought in.' [7]

So whenever a bad thought or bad imagination rises in the mind, bring in the contrary good thought. Good imaginations of the right kind should replace bad imaginations. This is not the ultimate solution, but this is all that most people can do in the beginning. It is like taking the help of the police to drive away the robbers. But when we reach a safe place, we don't need the help of the police any more. So until we get realization, we must take the help of good imaginations. Without that we cannot live in this world and attain spiritual progress.

However, we should see that imagination does not take a wrong path. It should be based on discrimination and renunciation and on the nature of the Self. Your attitude towards others depends on your attitude towards yourself. If you look upon yourself as a body, you see only human bodies all around you. If you look upon yourself as the luminous Self inhabiting the body, you will see the same light shining in all beings around you.

Unless we are prepared to face the evil some day and see the Divine even in that, our problem is not solved. We should learn to lay greater stress on the substance than on the form, greater stress on the Principle than on good and evil. We go on busying ourselves with good and evil without caring for the Principle which is beyond both good and evil. We should say: 'Forms are not important to me. I care more for the substance.'

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[7] वितर्कबाधने प्रतिपक्षभावनम्।

Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra*, 2.33

There are some worshippers of Śiva, who associate all women with the Goddess Pārvatī, and all men with Śiva, the great God, and then merge finally the Goddess and the God into the Principle out of which they come. Thus these worshippers solve many problems. What a difference it will make, if a person looks upon all women as the Goddess and all men as the great God!

There are some other devotees who associate all men with Sri Ramakrishna's form, and all women with the Holy Mother's form, and then finally transcending them, reach the Principle which stands at the back of both. Only thus can our problems be really solved. Now, at our present stage, disturbing thoughts and evil forms may be brushed aside, but this can never be the solution. There must come a time when we see the One at the back of both good and evil. And then good and evil will cease to affect us.

And if we are really able to look at these physical forms as manifestations of the Formless, and never as primary realities; if we are able to look at matter as a manifestation of thought, and thought as a manifestation of infinite Consciousness, then we can see everything in its right place, in its true setting. Then we are no longer deceived by the physical or mental forms as such. Such an attitude is essential for the practice of the presence of God.

Physically we must be in tune with the infinite physical universe, mentally with the infinite mental universe, and spiritually with the infinite supreme Spirit. And then we see everything in its proper place, in the proper light, and act accordingly. The finite should be always in tune with the Infinite and that, on all the different planes, in all the different forms of consciousness. One should feel the presence of God always at all levels.

Control of cosmic energy

The individual mind is in touch with the cosmic mind and our mental energy comes from a cosmic Source. We should know how to control and direct this psychic energy. Control is necessary to prevent the energy from flowing into lower centres, from flowing out through our sense organs and getting wasted through futile thinking and worrying and useless talk. This creates some tension in the beginning which cannot be avoided. In the perfected man this sort of control is not needed. All his psychic energy flows along higher channels. But in our case conscious control is very important. Unconscious control is what the psychologists call repression, and some forms of repression are harmful for certain people. But conscious, intelligent control is essential not only for spiritual life but also for normal healthy social life. Here Indian psychology differs from western psychology.

The cosmic energy is flowing through us all. We are all instruments more or less. But when we consciously stop the expression of this energy through the lower centres and let it find expression through the higher ones, we always feel fresh, then there is no old age for us so far as thought life is concerned. Sometimes we are not able to maintain the activity in the higher centres because of our old impressions and tendencies, and then there is a strong downward pull, a real tug-of-war which cannot be avoided if we are to grow at all. We can never stop the flow of energy, but we can give it a higher direction, consciously, intelligently, with an effort of the will.

Conscious, intelligent thinking is necessary. Conscious thinking removes the barrier, and when the obstruction is removed, more psychic energy flows in us.

First of all, give a conscious start with an effort of the will, and then the flow proceeds. Consciously try to have new ideas, consciously find new channels of expression and thinking, and when these are found, the whole process of directing psychic energy becomes natural without any effort.

Through conscious higher thinking we open the higher channels. And then, when the passage is open, higher thinking becomes easy. Higher thoughts flow in; in fact they come rushing. But always the beginning should be made consciously, with an effort of the will. If unconsciously higher thoughts are coming to us, then one day lower thoughts would be coming too. So the unconscious process is to be avoided by all means.

Higher thoughts must be consciously allowed to flow through us. It must never become an unconscious process.

Through conscious struggle when the higher channels are opened, higher thoughts come to us consciously, and then the higher life becomes very easy. A new passage is opened, physiologically and psychologically, and through it these higher thoughts can flow without any obstruction. 'Higher' really means deeper. We speak of 'higher' in terms of outer space but in spiritual life it is inner consciousness that matters, and hence we should rather use the word 'deeper' with regard to centres and channels of psychic energy. However, what is most important for us is to give a conscious start. This is the preliminary work that has to be done, and everything else follows.

Opening up the higher centres

The finite is always in touch with the Infinite. On the lower planes this is unconscious, on the higher planes it becomes conscious; you feel it. And what you have got to do is to rise to a higher plane, and then have higher expressions of the energy.

The task of the spiritual aspirant is to make the higher centres work, to stimulate them. One should consciously stop the activity of the lower centres and stimulate that of the higher ones, but it should be done consciously. It must be a conscious, intelligent process. *Japa*, prayer, meditation, etc. are all meant to start the activity of the higher centres.

Sometimes you may feel the higher centre and the lower centre at the same time, i.e. both want to act at the same time. And then comes a terrible tug-of-war. That cannot be avoided, and everyone has to pass through that state. Then you have to stop the activity of the lower centre with a great effort of the will.

Through our daily spiritual practices, through intense striving, the activity of the higher centres will become more and more natural, less strained. But this can never be attained before passing through this state of war, as it were. A general purification of the body and the mind is necessary, if the obstructions are to be removed so that the energy can find its expression through the higher channels and become creative on a higher plane. Creative it must be, either on the lower, the physical plane, or on a higher plane. Its expression can never be stopped, but its direction can be changed. And this is what is to be done by the spiritual aspirant.

It is not enough just to control one's energy, but one must know how to give it a higher direction. Otherwise the energy goes round and round, and becomes more and more of a whirlpool, or it may even easily take a lower course and find its expression through one of the lower centres. So much of energy has been stored up in us without finding any expression at all. Many persons become dull when the whole flow of energy is stopped, i.e. they no longer give it any expression through the lower centres, but at the same time, do not give it a higher turn either, and so the energy begins to stagnate and create troubles. Many persons are unable to use it on a higher plane and can only use it through the lower centres. They just become dull or whirlpools when the flow of energy through the lower centres is stopped. That is why we must be very careful when giving instructions to other people if they happen to belong to this lower type.

Sometimes one feels an upsurge of cosmic energy which cannot be stopped. Through prior training and purification of mind we should be ready to cope with it. So many different moods and impulses come to us, and we must learn to cultivate and culture higher moods and do away with the lower ones.

Inner control

Mostly some subconscious process is going on in ourselves without our even knowing it, and we feel only its effects. So we must be able to control the workings of our mind. We should be aware of the flowing of the cosmic Energy into us and be able to manipulate it within us. We cannot have control over the outside events — at least not perfect control — but we can have as much control as possible over ourselves.

There is the influence of stars and planets, the influence of the environment and the whole of the outer atmosphere, but all this is no reason for us to feel affected by them. If you cannot work against them, you have to remain insulated, as it were. Then you won't feel affected and will not be swept off your feet when any undesirable impulse or an onrush of energy comes. And through practice we become automatically insulated.

If you are open and come in touch with bad people, you will feel awfully affected. And in such cases if you are not guarded, and the wrong type of person comes, he will drag you down. And this downward direction may be only due to outward influence or it may be even due to our own negligence and lack of discrimination. The inner adjustment is the most troublesome affair in spiritual life and without that there can never be any poise or peace.

When you get a shock pass it on to the Divine

All this strict ethical culture helps us to a great extent. Sometimes with a great effort of the will, the inner balance is to be maintained. But even this becomes more and more natural through practice. And in spiritual life it is easier to have this balance if you try to be in a higher meditative mood, and be in touch with some vaster consciousness. For then you pass on the reactions that are in you to something vaster. You get the shock, but you pass it on to something else. So, in a way, the Infinite becomes our shock-absorber.

Devotees try to do this — passing the shock on to the Infinite — in their own devotional way: 'Lord, it is Thy will. What to do?' This is the psychological way of devotees for minimizing reactions.

The *jñānī* type tries to think of the Infinite of which he is a part. And the part can never jump out of the Whole. The Infinite is always ready to serve the finite, because the two can never be separated. In the case of a bubble we see that unless the ocean supports the bubble at every step, the bubble would burst every moment. Sometimes it has to shift its centre, but then it shifts its centre lying on the ocean. And this is what we have got to do.

If, one day, there is a rise of tremendous feeling in you, and you do not know how to find relief, rush to the Infinite, let this impulse take you to the Divine; and if you want to cry, wait until you have reached the Divine. Let us not stop short of that. That is the only way: to pass on everything to the Infinite.

Unless the finite tries to be in touch with the Infinite, no radical cleansing can be done. We cover all the filth and dirt, sometimes even hide it under flowers, but so long as there is no real cleansing of our whole mind, nothing can be done in spiritual life. Mere surface cleansing won't do.

The limited is always impure, and it becomes pure only by coming in touch with the Infinite, thus realizing its infinite nature. The real original sin is finiteness, the finiteness of our nature, and this original sin can be got rid of only by losing our finiteness, by coming in touch with the Infinite, with our true primary nature.

When we attain this unitive experience, the whole world stands transfigured before our eyes. Everything becomes good and auspicious to us. All the knots and kinks of the heart are destroyed and the bliss of the Infinite fills us through and through. We then feel like the Vedic *ṛṣi* who sang:

> The blissful winds are sweet to us.
> The seas are showering bliss on us.
> May the corn in our fields bring bliss to us.
> May the plants and herbs bring bliss to us.
> May the cattle give us bliss.
> O Father in Heaven, be Thou blissful unto us!
> The very dust of the earth is full of bliss.
> It is all bliss — all bliss — all bliss.[8]

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[8] मधुवाता ऋतायते मधुक्षरन्ति सिन्धवः । माध्वीर्नः सन्त्वोषधीः ॥
मधुनक्तमुतोषसि मधुमत् पार्थिवं रजः । मधुद्यौरस्तु नः पिता ॥
मधुमान्नो वनस्पतिः मधुमानस्तु सूर्यः । माध्वीर्गावो भवन्तु नः ॥

Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad, 39
(The translation is Swami Vivekananda's)

PART III

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

CHAPTER 27

FROM THE UNREAL TO THE REAL

Man and Reality

All of us suffer from the threefold affliction (*tāpat-raya*) — misery created by ourselves, misery caused by other beings, and misery caused by natural phenomena. Usually all the three are combined. But most often, the troubles created by our own selves dominate the field of our suffering.

What is the goal of life? To get rid of this threefold affliction. Everybody is constantly trying to avoid misery and bondage. But unless there is some possibility of attaining bliss and freedom, nobody would have felt the urge to get rid of misery. This potentiality, this possibility, is the central fact of life. If people were fully convinced that there could be no escape, nobody would even stir.

In every one of us there is the yearning for life, for knowledge, for happiness. All of us want to live and that, consciously and happily. Thus existence, knowledge and bliss are the very essence of our souls, our true nature.

And when we analyze the outside world too, we find the same thing standing at the back of all phenomena. Everything — living and non-living — stands before us as an object that exists, something that *is*. And everything has the capacity to force itself on our consciousness, possesses a sort of luminosity that shines in both the sentient and the insentient. In this there is no difference of kind but only of degree. As in the inside world, so also in the outside world we find this abiding sense of existence and consciousness. Thus, not merely in ourselves, but also in all outside objects we get a glimpse of the Reality. Again, the physical objects that we see around us fulfil some of the wants of every individual. We all run after the sense objects, in search of some particular sense pleasure which we think we shall derive from the possession of that

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thing, whatever its nature may be. The desire for happiness is always there in us. Sense objects only draw our mind, because of the idea that we are going to derive some enjoyment from them. It is because of this that we feel tempted, not because of the intrinsic value of that object. Thus we find that every external object has the capacity to exist by itself, to rouse our consciousness about it, and draw out our mind.[1]

However, if we analyze those external objects, we find that in the last analysis we do not know their real nature but only their names and shapes. The Reality they represent is unknown to us at present. Names and forms hide the Truth in ourselves and in the outside objects, but all names and forms reflect dimly the glory of the Reality at their back. This common, ultimate Reality which forms the substratum of our inner life and of the outside world is called Brahman or Ātman, the supreme Self, in the Upaniṣads.

In us there is always a subconscious feeling of identity, a connection with this Reality or Brahman. It may be very vague, very indefinite, but still it is there. The task of all spiritual life is to make this indefinite Self-consciousness definite. If we really want to come face to face with Truth, first we should begin with us, find out that which exists in ourselves at the back of our ego.

The primary awareness of 'I'

As long as there is a false self identification, a false sense of personality, so long the ultimate Truth can never be realized. There is in us this false identification of the Self with body, mind and ego, and during the time of this identification we see that we are shifting the centre of our consciousness continually. There is such a thing as having one's consciousness rooted in the Transcendental, even while working or living on the phenomenal plane, but this can never be done so long as all this wrong identification with the body and the mind lasts. Sometimes we identify ourselves with the body and say: 'Oh, I am hurt, I feel such physical pain.' Sometimes again there is identification with the mind: 'Oh, so-and-so was awfully rude to me. I feel so worried, I feel so sorry.' All this is wrong identification, but the common factor in this identification is 'I', 'I', 'I' — always this 'I' that comes in different forms. And so long as this 'I' lasts, we cannot get even a glimpse of Brahman. But there is one point to note: even at the time of this wrong identification, we have the consciousness of 'something' that does not change.[2] And it is the task of the spiritual aspirant to find out what that abiding and unchanging 'something' is.

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[1] अस्ति भाति प्रियं रूपं नाम चेत्यंशपञ्चकम् ।
आद्यत्रयं ब्रह्मरूपं जगद्रूपं ततोद्वयम् ॥

Dṛg-Dṛśya-Viveka, verse 20

What is this 'I'? 'How to know the Knower?'[3] No thought of the finite is ever possible without the thought of the Infinite, however indefinite it may be. Positing the one, we posit the other too. We cannot formulate the Infinite, we cannot have an idea of pure Consciousness, i.e. Brahman; but although It can never be formulated, It can be intuitively realized. There is such a thing as direct superconscious experience.

'The Truth can be realized by him whom It chooses and to whom It reveals Itself.'[4] From the monistic standpoint, you are your own chooser, because this Self, this Truth, is not something distinct from you, and if you choose yourself to be the knower of this Truth and really strive for That, you become That. From the monistic standpoint, spiritual realization is Self-realization.

From the dualistic point of view God is the Chooser. God's grace comes to those whom He chooses. But even here the problem of self persists. God's grace comes only to those who are ready for it, who have struggled hard for purity. Even in the case of the so-called sinners who are suddenly converted to holy life, their very 'sinning' gives them the knowledge of the workings of their lower mind. In them there is an unconscious but intense struggle for purity. From the dualistic point of view, spiritual realization means God-realization.

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[2] प्रतिबोधविदितम्. . .
Kena Upaniṣad 2.4

[3] विज्ञातारमरे केन विजानीयात्. . . ।
Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.4.14 and 4.5.15

[4] *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.2.23 and *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.3

From the Advaitic standpoint, Self-realization and God-realization mean one and the same. In the dualistic schools a distinction is made between these two: first comes self-realization and then comes God-realization. But in both paths it is essential to transcend the ego consciousness and discover the soul. Spiritual life proper begins only with the discovery of the soul. 'Be bold and face the Truth.' [5] There must be a merciless self-analysis. First of all, try to find and regain your own soul. Your soul is practically lost to you, and only after you have found it again can the question of this higher realization arise. Spiritual life begins with man's search for his own soul. Spiritual life begins with the recognition of the fact that we are neither bodies nor masses of emotions, neither men nor women, but are spiritual entities, parts of a vast spiritual Principle which is more real and infinitely more valuable than the physical world. And it is necessary to have this awareness as the very basis of all our striving.

The fundamental laws of spiritual life

There are two important laws governing the relationship between the self and the cosmos. The first law is: *Whatever one takes to be real draws one's whole being, one's thoughts, one's feelings, one's will.* If this unreal world appears to us as real, then it draws our whole being. If the Divine appears to us as real, then we turn away from the world and set our whole heart on the Divine. When we take the world to be real we are full of it. When we take the Divine to be real we are full of the Divine alone. So, whatever has become a reality to us, that we follow with our whole heart.

It is therefore necessary for us to enquire into the nature of Reality. And when we make this enquiry we discover another fact — the second fundamental law of spiritual life — that *our concept of the Reality depends upon our concept of*

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[5] Swami Vivekananda, 'To the Awakened India' *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1966), Vol. IV, p. 387

ourselves. For a child its dolls are real living beings. As it grows older, its concept of itself changes and hence the dolls lose their reality. Similarly, adolescence, youth and old age bring about changes in man's concept of the external world. There is a close connection between our knowledge of ourselves and our outlook on life. Subjective change always precedes our knowledge of the objective world.

The well-known story of the king who had an attack of some illness which affected his eyes, illustrates this point. Doctors advised the king to look always at green-coloured things. The king ordered the whole palace, orchard etc. to be painted green. But the wise minister suggested wearing of green spectacles instead. Then the king saw the whole world as green. Spiritual life begins only when our concept of ourselves changes and we begin to look upon ourselves as souls. When we look upon ourselves as spirit, we seek the infinite Spirit.

Whenever the physical world becomes more real than the spiritual world, our body has already become more real than our soul in our consciousness. As a matter of fact, there is first of all a fall in our consciousness, and then we become more conscious of the physical body and then of the external world.

Basis of reasoning

Verification through direct experience is the basis of reasoning in Vedānta. It is not mere intellectualism or logic chopping. Reasoning is always based on experience. Reasoning begins with the incontrovertible fact of the existence of the Self in us. Descartes said: *Cogito ergo sum*, 'I think, so I exist.' The Hindu would reverse the sentence: 'I exist, so I think.' This reasoning is extended to the physical world around us and the mental world within us. We then find that the Self alone is the one unchanging Reality while everything else is impermanent. That which is changing must be unreal or at least less real than that which always persists in all the three states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep. This is how a Vedāntic aspirant discriminates between the Real and the unreal.

There must be a clear analysis. We can even stand apart from our thoughts and watch them. We can watch our mind.

So the mind is an object that can be watched by some other subject.

> The form is perceived and the eye is its perceiver. It (the eye) is perceived and the mind is its perceiver. The mind with its modifications is perceived and the Witness (the Self) is verily the perceiver. But It (the Witness) is not perceived by any thing else.[6]

This is the way self-analysis, enquiry into our real nature, is conducted. By this we get a glimpse of the soul, the subject, that witnesses the object. But the highest Truth is beyond both the subject and the object.

When you are very reflective, you say to yourself: 'Oh, this thought rises in my mind' etc. So you become the witness of even your thought. The mind is composed of so many thoughts rising and disappearing. Hence the mind is constantly changing. But the Witness, the Self, does not change. All human search for the Real must always begin with this unchanging Self. The principle of Self-consciousness is the very basis of our personality. In the midst of all physical and mental changes there is in us some unchanging principle. And this gives us the clue to attaining the ultimate Reality.

That which is real in our consciousness ever continues to be. If the bubble disappears the water particle does not disappear. The body is the bubble, the Self is the water drop. That which is the true essence in us ever remains; that which is not real from the absolute standpoint drops off. The body drops off; the Self remains immutable, eternal, immortal.

Our concept of ourselves has an important bearing on our activities. Suppose we look upon ourselves as the body, then bodily enjoyment becomes the goal of our life. And suppose we come to think that the soul persists after death, and that our future life will wholly depend on our present activity, physical as well as mental, what would be our attitude then? Then we would act in a different way, because everything is not going to be over with death. We would then try to seek that which brings fulfilment, peace and blessedness to our souls. So our attitude makes a good deal of difference as far as our daily conduct and thinking are concerned. Through discrimination we must cultivate the right attitude.

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[6] रूपं दृश्यं लोचनं दृक् तद्दृश्यं दृक्तु मानसम्।
दृश्या धीवृत्तयस्साक्षी दृगेव न तु दृश्यते॥

Dṛg-Dṛśya-Viveka, 1

The nature of the Seer

The Principle of egoism is called Jīva. Three things are necessary to constitute Jīvahood: the internal organ or mind (*antaḥkaraṇa*), the 'I'-consciousness, and the reflection of Brahman in the mind, called *cidābhāsa*. All the three together constitute the Jīva. Of these, the presence of the internal organ is the basic element. This in turn is a special product of the three *guṇas* — *sattva, rajas* and *tamas* — which constitute Māyā. It is this internal organ which gives rise to 'I'-consciousness and reflects the light of Brahman. The reflected light along with the 'I'-consciousness makes up the Jīva. When the reflector or the internal organ is destroyed with the help of higher knowledge, what happens to the reflection? It was Brahman that was originally reflected, and in the absence of the reflector, the reflection remains non-different from Brahman. In other words, Jīva and Brahman are one when the *guṇas* are transcended. As long as the reflector is there, the Jīva is present; it is limited, bound. But when the reflector vanishes, there remains Brahman alone for which there is neither limitation nor bondage; It is the Infinite, the Absolute, the One-without-a-second.

Of course, this is a very high standpoint — the highest standpoint ever reached by mankind anywhere in the world. It is far away from the reach of most of us for the present, and it may take several years or births to attain it. What then must be our immediate concern? Our immediate problem should be to separate the reflection from the reflector. Brahman shines through the mind, but we are so preoccupied with the various modifications of the mind (that is, thoughts) that we do not really understand the Light that shines through it. We see this reflected light, only when the mind is purified and remains free from modifications. Then we see the light distinct from thoughts. Not only that. We also attain the realization that this reflected light is really a part of the infinite divine Light. First of all, however, we must get some glimpses of our own higher self. The question of the Infinite comes later on.

The inner Light

Intuition, the power of direct vision, lies dormant in us. It should be regained. Through that alone come the glimpses of higher realities. How to develop this higher power of intuition? Just watch how you enter into sleep and how you get out of it. You will find at first the sense organs are withdrawn back into the mind. Then the thoughts disappear, and you will have just a vague 'I'-consciousness. Finally this 'I' merges into deep sleep. When you wake up, the reverse process happens. At first the 'I'-consciousness emerges, and then this gets connected to the thoughts which arise in the mind, and the objects around. Just after waking up, there is a shadowy intermediate period when you retain pure 'I'-consciousness for a second. At that point the world appears like a shadow; it has not yet acquired objective reality for us. Something of this pure awareness should be attained consciously during our waking hours. That is the real task before the aspirant. We should attain to that plane where the dividing line between light and darkness is very thin.

In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* King Janaka questions the venerable sage Yājñavalkya: 'What serves as the light for man?' The sage replies that it is the light of the sun. It is by the light of the sun that he sits, goes out, works and comes back. When the sun has set what serves as the light? The moon. When there is no moon? The fire. When there is no fire? The sound. When the sound is also hushed? Questioning like this, he reaches back to his own Self.[7] It is the mind that recognizes the external objects. But behind the mind stands the luminous Self with the light of which we dream objects within. Think about that light with which we dream objects within. Think about that light which reveals the dream objects. What is that light? It is the Ātman, the Self Itself. The Self is self-luminous. It reveals Itself. Nothing can reveal It. It reveals other objects — external things and internal mental images. When the objects vanish, the self-luminous Ātman alone shines. Between the two states of waking and deep sleep, we remain for a second or so as this pure Self. The task is to attain it permanently during the waking hours. Then it is never lost.

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[7] *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.2-7

How to awaken intuition?

By making the best use of our threefold faculties of intellect, feeling and will, we develop the forgotten faculty of intuition in us. First of all, these faculties are to be purified. Purification is a difficult task. It takes a long time. The impressions (*saṁskāras*) of previous experiences are there lying hidden. It takes time to remove them. Some of these have to be just erased by an effort of the will. Some are to be restrained with the help of other impressions. Some others are to be changed into other forms. The energy stored as impressions in the mind is to be directed into higher channels. This is called sublimation. Here comes the need for Karma-yoga. By just thinking you have overcome hatred, you do not overcome it. You must put the idea into practice, show it in your life. Ideals must be converted into actions. The results of good actions are again stored as good *saṁskāras*. These purify the mind and strengthen it. Some of the *saṁskāras* can be modified or overcome through regular *japa* and meditation. Meditation also helps in coordinating and integrating the various faculties. When purification, integration and concentration of the three faculties of feeling, willing and thinking are achieved, the faculty of intuition is discovered. The light of the Ātman shines forth, at first in the form of flashes, but later on as a steady beam.

Then we find that the Self as Jīva operates through the mind, through the sense organs, through the physical body. In his famous hymn to Dakṣiṇāmūrti as *Guru*, Śrī Śaṁkara makes this idea clear :

> Just as the rays of the light hidden in a pot with a number of holes emanate from those holes, so the Self manifests itself through the eyes and other sense organs giving rise to the notion 'I know'. Every object shines (i.e. is known) after the Self manifests it. I bow down to that teacher who is known as Dakṣiṇāmūrti, who is none other than the supreme Self.[8]

When we get this experience we will be able to separate the instruments from the real Self. Then what we had been previously calling the self appears to be the false self. The false self is an aggregate of body, mind and senses. The real Self stands behind all these, illuminating and enlivening them. Our present task is to discover this luminous Self manifesting itself through us. That is our immediate goal. The ultimate goal of course is to merge this little Self in the infinite supreme Self or Brahman. But that problem does not arise now. Let us begin from where we are, and move forward purifying ourselves through our daily *japa*, meditation, studies and selfless discharging of duties.

Three types of bodies

The gross body is made up of gross matter. It is this that undergoes birth and death. As distinct from this gross body, we all have a subtle body and a causal body. When the gross body falls, the remaining two bodies still form a combination. To what body do the senses belong? If by the senses we mean the physical organs of perception like the external eye, the ear, etc., then they belong to the gross body. But if by the senses we mean the subtle power of which the eye and the outer organs are but instruments, then they belong to the subtle body. The causal body forms the support of even the subtle body.

When the physical body falls off, nothing is ended. The soul with all its passions and desires is still as bound as it was at the time of the existence of the gross body. So one should get rid of them all before one dies. Death is no solution, because as I said, nothing is ended with death. It makes us neither better, nor less ignorant. We must realize that Principle which is beyond life and death. There is a certain power in us which is distinct from the eye, but manifests through the eye, distinct from the ear, but manifests through the ear, distinct from the mind, but manifests through the mind. And the same power manifests itself in a similar way through the other different instruments or sense organs.

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[8] नानाच्छिद्रघटोदरस्थितमहादीपप्रभाभास्वरं
ज्ञानं यस्य तु चक्षुरादिकरणद्वारा बहिः स्पन्दते ।
जांनामीति तमेव भान्तमनुभात्येतत्समस्तं जगत्
तस्मै श्रीगुरुमूर्तये नम इदं श्रीदक्षिणामूर्तये ॥
Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotram, 4

In deep sleep the senses and the mind are withdrawn into the causal body, but when one returns to consciousness, one comes back with all one's desires and cravings and passions, all one's lust and anger and hatred, and nothing has been gained. Herein lies the great difference between spiritual consciousness and deep sleep, between *samādhi* and deep sleep. When the vision of Truth comes, it burns away all our desires and passions. If a fool enters *samādhi*, he comes back an illumined man, but then, you see, a fool cannot enter *samādhi*!

According to one classification we have three bodies, and according to another, we have five sheaths. Ordinarily we feel the gross body so much that we lose all feeling for the subtle and the causal bodies. Is it possible to form an idea of the different bodies that each human being possesses? Yes. It is possible if we become really introspective, and stop the outgoing tendencies of our mind by turning and directing it inwards. As long as the principle of life is connected with the body, every atom is made alive by it. In the body we come in touch with force, and force means energy, and this means vibration. When we proceed further, we come in touch with another kind of force or vibration, viz. our thoughts and emotions. We thus find that our personality is, as it were, a combination of vibrations. Sometimes very disturbing thoughts arise in the mind, and then we become something like a seething mass of vibrations in which this body of ours is placed. Proceeding further, if we are able to calm the mind, we feel our consciousness — not pure consciousness, of course, but a sort of mixed consciousness into which these indefinite feelings and emotions merge — a definite consciousness with 'I' as the predominant factor. This we may call the consciousness of the agent as distinct from the consciousness of the instrument, i.e. the mind and the senses. This is the empirical self, called *taijasa*. And as distinct even from this agent, there is pure consciousness, i.e. pure individualized consciousness that manifests itself through all forms of knowledge and all forms of sensation. The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* calls it the *prājña*.[9]

The individual and the Cosmos

Having come to the individualized consciousness, one can find that this individualized consciousness is a part of the infinite, immutable Consciousness or Brahman. But for all this we must become introspective and must lead a life of reflection and thought. There are some who try to come in touch with the cosmic Consciousness only after having reached individualized consciousness, while others try to think of the Cosmic at all times and at all stages, for the personality is in contact with the cosmos at various levels.

If I try to think of the real nature of my body, I find it is part of an unlimited ocean of matter, just as the bodies of all others are. When from the gross body I come to the body made of *prāṇa* or vital force, I feel that this vital energy in me is part of the cosmic vital energy. Having come to my emotions and feelings, I find that my emotions and feelings are part of the cosmic emotions and feelings. In the same way, my consciousness is part of the cosmic consciousness of which the mind and the senses are instruments, and finally I realize that my pure individualized consciousness is part of pure infinite Consciousness or Brahman. It is this supreme Consciousness that stands behind all our actions and thoughts giving reality to them all. So our personality is a complex which is to be analyzed by passing from the grosser aspects to subtler and subtler ones. Sometimes, if one is really introspective, one can feel one has become a mass of thoughts, as if one's body were floating in a pool of thoughts.

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[9] *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad,* 4, 5

Ordinarily we are so identified with the body and take such an exterior view of it that we find it very hard even to imagine that it is made of nothing but flesh and bone. It is all a question of becoming more sensitive, and ceasing to be so very impervious to self-analysis. We must develop a higher sensibility in order to become aware of all the subtler aspects.

If we develop a higher sensibility, we can reduce our personalities to a combination of thoughts, to a bundle of *vṛttis*. And thought, after all, is nothing but subtle matter and belongs to the phenomenon only, never to the Noumenon or the ultimate Reality. In the beginning, our individuality is like a red-hot iron ball in which the iron ball and the red light seem to be inseparable, but they can be separated. They are not really one. Sometimes one may even feel the existence of this pure consciousness as distinct from the body. Sometimes when one is thrown into a very elevated state, one may feel oneself to be distinct from the body and the mind.

All our emotions and feelings are based on the reality of the body. After a spiritual experience we continue to have relationships and emotions and feelings, but they are no longer connected with the body. Even when we rise above body consciousness, we are connected with one another as parts of the Whole, and this relationship is far closer than between husbands and wives, that of parents and children, and that of brothers and sisters and friends.

With one's spiritual progress one develops more and more of a kind of mental X-ray which is so necessary for clear analysis. Then we learn to see through things and relations, and no longer allow ourselves to be deceived by our unruly mind. One should try to direct this mental X-ray to oneself and find out one's true nature.

A true cosmic sense always loosens our possessive hold on other people, but what we usually do is to make use of everybody else for bringing enjoyment to us, either in a gross or in a subtle form. All our misery, frustrations, disappointments arise from this. By following the right path of spiritual practice and scrupulously sticking to it whatever happens, it is possible for the soul to rid itself of the limiting adjuncts, to attain to the Self and realize its eternal relationship with the Universal Self. As Sri Ramakrishna used to say:

> If one analyses oneself, one doesn't find any such thing as 'I'. Take an onion, for instance. First of all you peel off the red outer skin; then you find thick white skins. Peel these one after another, and you won't find anything inside.[10]

One may retain one's individual consciousness and yet come in touch with cosmic consciousness. And unless one does that, there is no question of ever reaching the state of transcendental Consciousness. One must proceed step by step towards the highest realization. Mere talking of the Absolute won't do; mere soaring to wonderful speculations and imaginations won't do.

There should be conscious attempts at outgrowing our present state. Then as we advance, conflicts will cease on the lower plane, but there will be conflicts on a higher plane. Struggles and conflicts will continue until we reach the highest plane. When we assign to all phenomena a reality of the second or third order, we can remain unaffected by the phenomenal world.

Nature of the physical world

Whatever becomes the object of your consciousness is Māyā (phenomenon), and you must separate the knower from the known, the seer from the seen, the witness from all the things he is witnessing, the perceiver from the things perceived. There must be merciless, clear analysis and clear thinking at every stage of the spiritual journey.

According to the German philosopher Kant, the external object is there but we do not know its real nature. When we see it, time and space contribute something to the perception. The Vedāntin says that what Kant calls space, time and causation is Māyā, and that it has to be transcended. Kant did not see any means to transcend it; so he said that the 'thing-in-itself' could never be known. Vedānta knows the means and tells you how to do it. Kant did not know of the possibility of transcending the mind and the world of phenomena, of separating the seer completely from the seen. Vedānta begins where Kant left off.

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[10] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math: 1974), p. 78

Physical objects are always percepts, being perceived by one or other of the sense organs. The sense organs themselves become percepts to the mind. In its turn, the mind becomes a percept to the Self which is always the witness or the perceiver and can never become a percept, as this would mean a *regressus ad infinitum*. We must stop somewhere.

In Vedānta consciousness is always stressed. Subject and object, mind and matter — all exist in consciousness. We should never lose sight of this fact; otherwise, there is a danger of our muddling up everything and losing sight of the true issue. In deep sleep, consciousness is present. After waking from sleep we say, 'I knew nothing', but to enable us to say, 'I knew nothing', consciousness must have been present during sleep. One cannot, therefore, predicate a time when consciousness is not.

It is only when a man believes that there is something distinct from himself that he has a desire for the possession of that something, whatever it be. The very fact of his having any desire itself is a proof that he has already developed the idea of his being a subject, and that everything other than himself is an object to him. That is why for an illumined soul perfect desirelessness is an accomplished fact as he has full control over himself. Such a soul, having realized the One-without-a-second, has nothing to desire as there are no objects for such a soul.

The Real and the apparent

The screw is to be unscrewed now, just in the reverse order. After the process of evolution and superimposition comes the process of going back to the cause, involution or de-superimposition. From the gross to the subtle, from the subtle to the causal, then a long jump, and you have the eternal Self at the back of all. But first comes a life of preparation, of scrubbing and cleaning, for, so long as any impurity is found in the mind, the reflector can never reflect the light of consciousness properly and perfectly. And our mind is that reflector. That is why all those layers of dirt and dust must be taken off before the mind can even begin to reflect the light in the proper way again. The poorly reflected light is the whole trouble with us now. It distorts the Reality and creates delusions and illusions.

The Vedāntin believes in evolution as a stage in life, but never as the ultimate goal; and to him even this evolution is merely an appearance, Māyā, never an absolute reality. So if we speak of evolution at all, this is only meant in a very relative sense, not as an absolute fact. For the Absolute Self, there is no such thing as evolution at all. The Self is the immutable witness of all changes.

The whole trouble is that to us the appearance has become real, and the Reality unreal! It is a most ludicrous situation, really speaking. But fools that we are, we have to pay the price in misery and suffering, and no end of disillusionments. All wrong identification must be broken. And this means pain in the beginning. Blessed is pain, pain that is the forerunner of freedom and bliss. The darkness of the world is illumined by the Self, but we do not know Its true nature and do not see Its light though we live and move with the help of the dim reflected light.

Evolution in Advaita Vedānta is not a question of something becoming something else. It is not like the milk becoming curds; then it loses its real nature. But it is like the rope 'becoming' a snake; in this case the rope does not undergo any real change. But when the rope has been mistaken for a snake, it brings in all the troubles of a real snake: fear etc. So also, by taking the unreal for the Real we bring for ourselves no end of troubles.

The world-dream alone appears to be real so long as we are not awake, so long as the vision of the Ātman has not come to us. And our waking state has no greater reality than our dream state. Both are equally unreal.

The word 'unreal' should not be misconstrued. The perception of a snake in place of a rope is not false in the sense of there being absolutely nothing to account for the appearance of the snake. The rope forms the substratum, the basis, on which is superimposed the idea of the snake. Māyā is not an illusion in the sense of mere nothingness. It is a term coined to explain how the one immutable Brahman appears as this manifold universe. Even the Nirvāṇa of Buddhism does not mean nothingness. Annihilation refers to the destruction of sense experience and the end of sorrow. Even the knowledge of annihilation of anything requires a conscious witness and that is the Self. There can be no knowledge of annihilation without some consciousness being present. How could have Buddha taught for so many years if he had been 'annihilated' in Nirvāṇa? Vedānta is a sort of transcendental Realism which has, however, a place in it for idealism and realism as these terms are commonly understood.

Existence and consciousness

Sat or the Real has been described as that which existed in the past, which exists now, and will continue to exist in future without ever changing its nature or ever undergoing any transformation. Anything that does not satisfy this condition comes under *asat* or unreal. The unreal may not be absolutely non-existent, but if anything exists for some time and then disappears again or undergoes any change, it belongs to the category of *asat*, the unreal. And such is the case with the entire phenomenal world without any exception. Certain things are absolutely unreal, cannot exist under any circumstances at any time; for example, castle in the air, horns of a hare, son of a barren woman, etc. These words do not convey any meaning and have no objective counterpart. We can imagine a castle in the air, no doubt, but we can never live in it! As distinct from these there are things that may be put under the category of empirical reality; they are proved to be unreal only on the realization of the absolute Reality. This phenomenal universe which we perceive falls under the category of empirical reality, and persists until the dawn of the highest knowledge, the light of which dispels even the shadow of this phenomenal world, even the shadow of our own phenomenal existence. After attaining to the highest illumination, when the illumined person comes down to the plane of the phenomenon, he sees this whole phenomenal existence, but regards it as a shadow, knows it to be an unreality that has no real ultimate existence.

In our personality there is the consciousness of that which is ultimately Real, mixed up with the consciousness which comes under empirical reality. So our ordinary consciousness is a combination of pure Consciousness and relative subject-object consciousness. And to the extent we are able to eliminate the phenomenon, to that extent we become spiritual. The link between our experience of the world and the experience of the Self or Brahman lies not on the side of the phenomenon, but on the side of that which persists under all circumstances, both in the relative and in the absolute states. Our self-consciousness is not altogether wrong, but it consists of a real element and a false element and the latter has to be eliminated through the realization of the One that manifests Itself as many.

First of all, an aspirant sees the many, and then he tries to see the One in the many, both the One and the many appearing as real. Advancing further, he realizes that the One alone is real in the true sense of the term, and the phenomenon has only a secondary reality which is entirely dependent on the existence of the One.

Vedānta begins with an enquiry into the nature of the self or the 'I'-consciousness. It ends with the attainment of the One-without-a-second. Between these two states are a number of intermediate states of consciousness. The aspirant's 'I'-consciousness goes on expanding until it embraces the whole existence. Correspondingly, his concept of the world goes on changing. The lines dividing the self, the world and God become more and more blurred, and finally the splendour of the supreme Spirit envelops all existence.

CHAPTER 28

SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

Sudden conversion

In the spiritual history of the world we come across remarkable cases of transformation of animal-men with animal propensities into divine men reflecting divine consciousness and divine compassion.

Those who have studied the life of Sri Ramakrishna will recall the name of a great personality, Girish, the famous dramatist-actor of Bengal. In our youth we had the privilege of seeing and hearing him. He had once been a Bohemian living a fast life. But the touch of his Master, Sri Ramakrishna, brought about a wonderful transformation in him and changed his life completely. From a state of animal propensities, he was changed to a state of divine purity in which he felt divine consciousness every moment of the day.

In ancient times there lived in India a youth who had taken to high-way robbery finding no other means to support his family. One day Nārada, the great sage and illumined teacher of that period, was passing by and was attacked by the robber. Nārada admonished him saying, 'You say you have been committing all these crimes for the sake of your family; but do you think any of them will accept any share of the tremendous sin which you have been incurring all along? Go and ask them.' The robber had never thought of this and wanted to find out the truth of the matter. Making sure of Nārada's remaining there by tying him to a tree, he went home. He told each one of his people — father, mother and wife — how he was earning his livelihood by robbery and murder, and asked: 'Do you share my sin?' But none of them was in the least prepared to do that. The reply he received was, 'It is your duty to maintain us. We don't mind how you earn your living, neither do we take any share of your sins.' Their replies shocked him into an awakening. He realized the futility and harmfulness of the life he was leading and felt a tremendous desire to follow the path of truth. Hastening back to Nārada, he untied him and implored him to become his *guru* and impart him spiritual instructions. The story goes that he learned to practise meditation and often became lost in that state for so long a time that an ant-hill grew around him. When Nārada returned years later to visit him, he found that the erstwhile robber and free-booter had become an illumined soul. That was Vālmīki, the author of the great epic *Rāmāyaṇa* which describes the life and exploits of Rāma, a divine Incarnation.

Centuries later, St. Francis was born in Assisi. He was a leader of the gay young men of the town, and his friends called him 'the king of revellers'. But once while praying in a small church, he heard the divine Voice commanding him to repair the church, and a great and sudden change came over him. He chose a life of purity, prayer and service. But this kind of life was not so easy. Soon after his conversion, as he was walking along a mountain path singing in praise of God, he encountered a band of robbers. They asked him, 'Who are you?', and St. Francis replied that he was the herald of the Great King. The annoyed robbers tossed him into a snow-filled pit and went away. But Francis got up unruffled, and continued his journey praising God as usual. The spiritual transformation that he had undergone had been sufficiently deep to give him strength to face all kinds of troubles. He later on founded a great religious Order.

Think of St. Augustine the great fourth-century theologian and mystic. In his youth he led a very dissolute life. But soon he was disgusted with himself, and then had to face the hard struggle of spirit against flesh. At last he could not stand it any more. One day he cried with tears in his eyes: 'O Lord, how long? How long? Tomorrow and tomorrow! Why not today and why not now?' As he was thus crying for illumination, he heard a Voice: 'Take up and read. Take up and read.' Augustine went to his friend and neighbour and opened the Bible. The book opened at the Acts of the Apostles and he read: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof.' All at once a great change came over him. His carnal cravings fell away. Augustine the roisterer was on his way to transformation. He had a glimpse of divine Wisdom by which all things are made. 'Have been' ceased to be real; there was only 'to be', a being that is eternal. The past disappeared in an eternal Now. From the inner core of his soul Augustine prayed: 'O Lord, help me to perceive Thee, help me to perceive myself. For by knowing Thee I can know myself.' Later on, a spiritual force which his mind itself was unable to grasp enabled that struggling man to look beyond the 'vortex of his ego'. This was a genuinely divine experience which made Augustine a mystic and a saint with an inner poise born of spiritual consciousness. The secret of inner poise is the transformation of the inner life into consciousness of the Divine, the shifting of the centre of one's consciousness from the ego to the Divine.

We see something of this shifting of the centre of consciousness in the life of Sri Ramakrishna's great disciple, Vivekananda. After his father's sudden death, the young Narendra had been passing through a very difficult time, for his family was in real distress and it was necessary to go in search of a job. He went from office to office without success. Those who had once called themselves his friends turned a cold shoulder. The world suddenly seemed to be totally evil. Some days there were not even provisions for the family, and when Narendra's purse was empty, he would tell his mother that he had been invited out to dine and remained practically without food. In the midst of these trials, doubts came to him. 'Does God really exist?', he wondered. 'And if so, does He really hear the fervent prayers of a man in misery?'

One evening while returning home to Calcutta with tired limbs and a jaded mind, Narendra was overpowered with exhaustion and sank down on the outer porch of a house by the road. Suddenly, as if by some divine power, the coverings of his soul were removed one after another. All doubts regarding the co-existence of divine justice and the presence of misery were resolved. By deep introspection he found the meaning in it all. Bodily fatigue left him and his mind was refreshed with wonderful strength and peace.[1] Later on Vivekananda attained many spiritual experiences and became a great illumined soul.

The cause of inner change

Such instances appeal to our imagination because they are spectacular, but there are many simpler cases, quite distinct from these transformations, of people being transmuted from the animal to the divine state. How does it happen? The new personality emerging out of the old, appears to belong to a new species altogether with very little resemblance to its predecessor. Physically, of course, they have the same basis, but the inner content — the consciousness — has completely changed. How does such a change take place?

The ancient teacher of Yoga, Patañjali, gave this aphorism: 'Actions are not direct causes in the transformation of nature. They act simply as breakers of obstacles to the evolution of nature; as the farmer removes an obstacle blocking the course of a stream of water, which then runs down by its own nature.'[2] This is how the evolution from one species to another is accomplished. Commenting on this aphorism, Swami Vivekananda says:

> The water for irrigation of fields is already in the canal, only shut in by gates. The farmer opens these gates, and the water flows in by itself, by the law of gravitation. So, all progress and power are already in every man; perfection is man's nature, only it is barred in and prevented from taking its proper course. If anyone can take the bar off, in rushes nature. Then the man attains the powers which are his already. Those we call wicked become saints, as soon as the bar is broken and nature rushes in. It is nature that is driving us towards perfection, and eventually she will bring everyone there. All these practices and strug-

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[1] Eastern and Western Disciples, *Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974), pp. 90-94

[2] निमित्तमप्रयोजकं प्रकृतीनां वरणभेदस्तु ततः क्षेत्रिकवत्।

Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra,* 4.3

> gles to become religious are only negative, work to take off the bars and open the doors to that perfection which is our birthright, our nature.
>
> Today the evolution theory of the ancient Yogīs will be better understood in the light of modern research. And yet the theory of the Yogīs is a better explanation. The two causes of evolution advanced by the moderns, viz. sexual selection and survival of the fittest, are inadequate. Suppose human knowledge to have advanced so much as to eliminate competition, both from the function of acquiring physical sustenance and of acquiring a mate. Then according to the moderns, human progress will stop and the race will die. The result of this theory is to furnish every oppressor with an argument to calm the qualms of conscience. Men are not lacking, who, posing as philosophers, want to kill out all wicked and incompetent persons (they are of course, the only judges of competency), and thus preserve the human race! But the great ancient evolutionist Patañjali declares that the true secret of evolution is the manifestation of the perfection which is already in every being; that this perfection has been barred and the infinite tide behind is struggling to express itself. These struggles and competitions are but the results of our ignorance, because we do not know the proper way to unlock the gate and let the water in. This infinite tide behind must express itself; it is the cause of all manifestation. Competitions for life or sex-gratification are only momentary, unnecessary, extraneous effects, caused by ignorance. Even when all competition has ceased, this perfect nature behind will make us go forward until everyone has become perfect. Therefore there is no reason to believe that competition is necessary to progress. In the animal the man was suppressed, but, as soon as the door was opened, out rushed man. So, in man there is the potential god, kept in by the locks and bars of ignorance. When knowledge breaks these bars the god becomes manifest.[3]

The 'god' here is our spiritual inner Self which helps us to remove the final barriers of ignorance so that the Spirit can shine forth in all its glory.

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[3] 'Rāja-yoga', *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), Vol. I, pp. 291-293

Ignorance, the main barrier to change

What is this barrier of ignorance? Psychology teaches us that the subtle impressions, tendencies, desires, and passions, lying in the depths of the unconscious have tremendous effect on our conscious lives. They exist in the subtle body — the mental, emotional body — and express themselves through the physical body. The control of the subconscious means that the subtle emotional forces, desires and passions should not be allowed to manifest themselves on a lower plane. They are to be expressed on a higher plane — to be purified, sublimated, and utilized for the welfare of the individual and society.

From the spiritual point of view, all subtle tendencies and impressions must be given a spiritual turn. Habits and tendencies must be controlled at their very root by resolving them into the causal state which, in its turn, is to be transcended.

Attachments and aversions arise from egotism; egotism is produced by ignorance. Self-knowledge, or the realization of the supreme Spirit in us, alone can burn away the seeds of desire and make the soul attain its original purity, freedom and peace. One of the minor Upaniṣads says: 'The mind of man alone is the cause of his bondage and is also the means of freedom.'[4] When the mind is attached to material objects, the result is bondage; when it is freed from such attachment, the soul is restored to that freedom which is the birthright of every one of us.

Behind all our urges, desires and passions there is the soul's desire for eternal existence, complete knowledge, and immortal bliss. This desire is fulfilled by attaining the highest spiritual experience, the experience of *Sat-Cit-Ānanda* or Existence-Consciousness-Bliss Absolute which is present in each one of us, permeating and interpenetrating our individual consciousness. It is only our ignorance and egotism that make us forget our spiritual nature. Through Self-knowledge our freedom can be regained. This is the open secret of spiritual life.

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[4] मन एव मनुष्याणां कारणं बन्धमोक्षयोः ।

Amṛtabindu Upaniṣad, 2

It is common experience that wrong thoughts and emotions affect our mind and body. Many truth-seeking doctors and psychiatrists are bringing this fact home to us, that our wrong attitudes and emotions born of ignorance, are the causes of many physical and psychical ills which are, to a great extent, preventable. A wise physician, Sir William Osler, remarked that the fate of a tubercular patient depended more on what he had in his head than on what he had in his chest. More depends on the nature of our thoughts and emotions than our outward actions.

Every man can change

Even a worldly man can change if he is ready to give up his worldliness and all the complexes he has formed in his mind; otherwise never. It is not enough to have lukewarm piety. An anchored boat does not move. Our complexes are anchoring us to worldly life. First of all the anchor must be lifted. We must break our complexes, however painful this process may be. Then we must row the boat of our life swiftly to make good the time already lost. Unless we uproot all our deep-rooted *saṁskāras,* we cannot hope to become spiritual. Moral purification must precede spiritual purification.

Many expert psychologists reveal to us that inner conflicts, pent-up anger, hatred, jealousy, fear and other negative emotions can give us pains in the neck, ulcers in the stomach, sugar in the blood, diseases of the heart, and various other forms of ailments known as neuroses. They tell us how, through the sublimation of emotions, the neurotic trend can be altered and the outer life of a patient changed. There are remarkable cases of persons who after remaining invalids for years, regained their health as a result of learning to think for themselves, to face the problems of life and readjust themselves to it on a healthy basis. It is heartening to hear a modern psychologist state positively: 'The human personality *can* change. It is not only the young child who is pliable. All of us retain the capacity to change, even to change in fundamental ways, as long as we live.'

We have a saying in India: 'As long as a person breathes there is hope.' There is hope for every one of us who sincerely wants to improve. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā* Śrī Kṛṣṇa brings hope to everyone: 'Even if you are the most sinful of sinners you can cross all sin and go beyond all evil, on the raft of Self-knowledge.' [5] Self-knowledge is like a blazing fire which burns away all evil and reveals the glory of the Spirit, the Spirit which dwells in the heart of every one of us, whether we know it or not.

From their wide spiritual experiences Hindu sages have been telling us through all ages that by changing our spiritual consciousness we can bring about great changes in our thoughts and emotions, and also great changes in our body. Not only the impure mind and the impure subtle body, but also the impure physical body of the animal-man can be transmuted into the pure subtle body and the pure physical body of the Godman. The Godman's body is made of a purer stuff, differently organized and polarized in a spiritual way so that within that body he can do no wrong.

Sri Ramakrishna gives the illustration of a sword made of steel, which is touched by the philosopher's stone and turned into gold.[6] The sword retains its form, but with that sword of gold no harm can be done. Just as the quality of the sword changes, so also the quality of our body and mind changes. That is what we find when we practise Yoga.

Human habits and tendencies

There are different theories about our subtle habits and tendencies which are to be conquered, transmuted and transcended in spiritual life. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* describes three types of men, characterized by *tamas, rajas* and *sattva. Tamas* dominates the animal-man and is characterized by darkness and ignorance, heedlessness, and delusion. *Rajas* is characterized by passion and restlessness that dominate the average human being, with all the attendant discord and suffering.

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[5] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 4.36

[6] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), pp. 104, 292

Sattva dominates the man of spiritual inclination, and is characterized by knowledge and harmony.[7]

The man of *tamas* eats unclean food.[8] As a worker he is unsteady, arrogant, deceitful, despondent and procrastinating.[9] He undertakes all his actions out of delusion, heedless of the consequences.[10] If he gives gifts, he does so to the wrong person, at the wrong place or time, or in the wrong way.[11] If he worships, he does so without real faith and charity.[12] He is deluded by superstitions, and practises austerities to harm others.[13]

The man characterized by *rajas* or passionate activity, prefers food which is exciting — bitter, sour, hot and pungent.[14] He is too attached to his work and to selfish interests or, may be, to other people and their interests. He is over-anxious about the fruits of action, and all his actions are for the satisfaction of desires or vanity. He is greedy, violent, easily elated or downcast, prone to fear and worry.[15] He gives gifts grudgingly, for the sake of a return, aiming at fruits.[16] He performs even worship for the sake of results or for show.[17] If he practises austerities, it may be to gain respect or power, and he does so ostentatiously.[18]

The man characterized by *sattva* or harmony takes food that promotes strength, health, longevity, and which is clean and wholesome.[19] He works free from attachment and egotism, being endowed with fortitude and enthusiasm, unaffected by success or failure.[20] His actions are performed conscientiously but with detachment, without desire for reward or anxiety about results.[21] He gives gifts, with compassion, to those who can make no return, and at the right time and the right place.[22] He undertakes the threefold austerity with deep faith and purely for spiritual end. The austerity of the body includes cleanliness, chastity, and non-violence. Speaking words that give no offence and are at the same time truthful and beneficial, and reciting sacred texts — these are his austerity of speech. He is often silent, his mind being engaged with thoughts spiritual. The cultivation of such silence along with serenity, self-control and purity of heart constitutes his austerity of mind.[23]

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[7] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 14.11-13

[8] ibid., 17.10

[9] ibid., 18.28

[10] ibid., 18.25

[11] ibid., 17.22

[12] ibid., 17.13

[13] ibid., 17.19

[14] ibid., 17.9

[15] ibid., 18.27

[16] ibid., 17.21

[17] ibid., 17.12

[18] ibid., 17.18

[19] ibid., 17.8

[20] ibid., 18.26

[21] ibid., 18.23

[22] ibid., 17.20

There are various schools of thought with regard to the formation of our tendencies and instincts. The behaviourist holds that environment plays the greatest part. The introspectionist, on the other hand, believes that instincts are natural impulses or urges innate in an organism, and that we are not simply products of environment or creatures of reaction to outside stimuli. The organism itself has an evolutionary urge to change, the *élan vital.* Some biologists and psychologists trace our instincts to childhood days, and even go so far as to attribute all of them to our parents and ancestors.

There are other western thinkers who believe that ethereal beings are born in human bodies, complete with their own innate tendencies, desires and passions. Thomas Huxley, a great evolutionist and supporter of Darwin, held that every sentient being is reaping what it has sown, if not in this life, in one or other of the infinite series of antecedent existences of which this is the latest term. His conclusion was that, like the doctrine of evolution itself, the doctrine of transmigration has its roots in the world of reality. We are born with certain tendencies innate in the organism, and that is why the organism reacts as it does to outside stimuli.

In the *Bhagavad-Gītā,* Śrī Kṛṣṇa gives us the ancient Hindu view that just as the embodied Self passes through the stages of childhood, youth and old age in one body, even so does it pass into another body.[24] Just as a person casts off worn-out clothes to put on others that are new, so the indwelling Self casts off worn-out bodies and enters into others which are new.[25] But we carry our habits and tendencies with us.

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[23] ibid., 17.14-17

[24] ibid., 2.13

[25] ibid., 2.22

The ancestors to whom we trace our habits and tendencies are none other than ourselves. Instead of making scapegoats of our ancestors, and blaming them for all our ills, let us take full responsibility on ourselves for our present condition, and then try to change ourselves for the better. This is the most practical view.

The god and the demon in us

Studying our own inner natures, we find within us contradictory elements. We need not go outside of ourselves to find the demon or god. They all dwell in us. The ancient sages of India were great metaphysicians as well as psychologists, and revealed this in many an anecdote of the Upaniṣads. Thus we read in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* that three classes of beings, gods, men and demons — all children of Prajāpati, the first creator — sought instruction from him. To each of them he gave the same single syllable *da* as his instruction. The gods understood it to mean *dāmyata* or 'control your senses and mind'. The men understood it to mean *datta* or 'control your avarice and perform acts of charity', and the demons understood it to mean *dayadhvam* or 'control your cruel nature and be kind and compassionate'.

Śaṁkara, the great mystic and philosopher of nondualism, comments on this anecdote thus: There are no gods or demons other than men. The same species of man, according to his degree of self-control, charity and compassion, and according to the dominating tendency of *sattva* (balance), *rajas* (activity), or *tamas* (inertia), is called god, man or demon; that is why the same instruction was understood in three different ways according to the dominant nature of the hearer. Those men lacking in self-control, but otherwise endowed with good qualities are gods; those who have excessive greed are average men; while those who are cruel and take pleasure in injuring others are demons. All the three disciplines mentioned are meant for man to practise; for god, man and demon, all dwell within our human nature and according to our degree of balance, performance of good deeds, and control of greed and cruelty, we may be called gods, men, or demons.[26]

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[26] *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad,* 5.2.1-3, and Śaṁkara's commentary thereon.

There is a well-known passage in the Upaniṣads about two birds of beautiful plumage, closely united in friendship, dwelling in the same tree. One bird, deluded by ignorance, eats the fruits that grow on it with relish, while the other which sits at the top of the tree, remains still and at peace. The lower bird eating the fruits stands for the satisfaction of human desires inspired by *rajas* or passion. The upper bird, like those who are dominated by *sattva,* feels no hunger for the fruits growing on the lower branches of the tree. Every once in a while, the bird who is restlessly eating without ever becoming satisfied, looks up at the higher bird, who is so peaceful, ready to fly away at any moment. He feels great love for his friend at the top and, longing to join him there, hops upward but is stopped by the sight of another fruit. Finally however, losing all desire for everything that impedes his upward progress, he succeeds in joining the other bird only to discover that both of them are really one.[27] He realizes then that through ignorance he had identified himself with *rajas,* the passion-producing forces of worldly desire. When this identification ceases, and the realization of his true unchangeable spiritual nature takes place, the brute nature is transformed and transcended.

Masks of the soul

Ignorance is dangerous because it makes us forget the Spirit. And it is owing to this ignorance that the Spirit puts on a mask, a 'personality' (*persona* means mask). We assume one mask after another to such an extent that we are unable to say what we actually are! Girish, the great actor-dramatist of Bengal, used to say, 'Sometimes when we had dressed up some of our actresses, I could no longer recognize them or know who was who.' In the same way, the Spirit puts on a subtle body, then a gross body, and then puts on all sorts of costumes over that until it is no longer able to recognize its true self. And just as we sometimes cannot find our true selves, so also we may be unable to recognize others. Unless the mask of ignorance is destroyed and we learn to see through the mask, we shall never discover the Spirit within. It is this false identification of ourselves with the mask that is the cause of our suffering, the cause of our bondage. The suffering will cease as soon as the soul realizes its spiritual nature, its union with the Oversoul — the other bird at the top of the tree who is always there, waiting for its beloved.

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[27] *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.1.1-3; *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 4.6,7

According to Vedānta, the mind and the senses form the subtle covering to the soul, and our physical body is the gross covering. Both these coverings are to be so purified that they reflect the light of the Spirit, which is already there. This is the purpose of all moral and spiritual disciplines.

We should have a clear conception of the mind, the body and the soul. There are many different conceptions of the relation between body and mind. Psychoanalysts consider the individual not as a body plus mind or as a mind plus body, but as an integrated body-mind.[28] One of them has said: 'The mind and the body are one and indivisible. Your mind is your body and vice-versa.' There are others who give the mind a much higher place than the body: 'The mind is something non-material. It cannot be seen, touched, measured or weighed. It is something spiritual, if you will.'[29] This is an advance over the body-mind theory. Dr. Jung goes further when he says, 'The ego is ill for the very reason that it is cut off from the whole and has lost its connection with mankind and the spirit.'[30] But, as is clear from his book, *The Modern Man in Search of a Soul,* he too does not seem to have discovered that the pure Spirit is different from the mind which is merely its fine covering and instrument. Western psychology is still in its infancy, and it is too early to expect it to discover the true Self of man.

The Hindu sages studied all the various states of human consciousness in order to discover the true nature of man. Vedānta speaks of three bodies of man who in his essential nature is pure Spirit. First there is the causal body, the unconscious ego, in which all diversity lies dormant, as in deep sleep. Next comes the subtle body, a combination of the self-conscious ego, the mind, the subtle impressions of memory, the subtle organs of sense knowledge, and seeds of action — all of which are manifested in dreams. But our so-called waking state — the third state of physical activity — is often little better than a dream. The physical eye, ear, and other organs of the senses are merely instruments of the subtle forces which express themselves as powers of seeing, hearing, and so on, the activities of everyday physical life. The gross body of physical organs is a seat for the subtle body and is controlled by it.

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[28] See E. A. Strecker and K.E. Appel, *Discovering Ourselves* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1954), p. 19.

[29] ibid., p. 9

[30] Dr. Carl G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 141

Transformation of character — an important test of spiritual change

Have you come across people who go about proclaiming that they have been saved, and who are over-anxious to force others to their way of salvation? They want to save others before they have learned how to save themselves. There is a story about sham religious change. A little girl knocked at the front door of a grocery store on a Sunday morning. Her friend, the daughter of the grocer, stuck her head out of a second storey window and said, 'My friend, we all went to the camp meeting and got converted. If you want milk on the Sabbath, you'll have to come around to the back door.' Previously the store used to stay open on Sundays but from now on, the front door would remain closed on that day with business as usual done through the back door. Many of us are trying to do much the same thing. This sort of 'conversion' is worse than the old life. There should be a real change. We should change our ways for something better. Giving up the life of hypocrisy, we have to follow the moral path seriously and conquer our lower nature of *tamas* and *rajas,* the dark and disturbing forces, with the help of *sattva,* the harmonious quality which keeps the soul on the spiritual path.

This is the lesson we learned at the feet of the great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, who told us what had happened to some of the devotees when their Master was alive. Many spiritual seekers gathered around him, especially toward the close of his life. Swami Vivekananda, the foremost of Sri

Ramakrishna's disciples, found that some of his brother disciples used to wait eagerly for miraculous manifestations of the Master's divine power that always threw them into high spiritual moods. Some of them started falling into partial trances, accompanied by tears and a great show of emotion. The Swami once complained to the Master that he never experienced any such state. The Master told him that superficial emotions and visions were small things compared to the attainment of purity of mind and heart which led to high spiritual experience and freedom, transforming human nature completely. 'My child, do not be disturbed. When a huge elephant runs into a pond, it sets up a great commotion there, but if it goes into the waters of the Ganges, little commotion is produced. These devotees are like small ponds, but you are like that river.' [31]

Following the instructions of the Master, Swami Vivekananda told the young devotees that if effusions of sentiment were not followed by a corresponding transformation and purity of character strong enough to destroy worldly cravings and awaken spiritual consciousness, they were of no real value in spiritual life. Many individuals, unwilling to undergo the strict disciplines of spiritual life, keep up only a show and become hypocrites. Some who do not care to make their moral fibre strong and attain purity, may become channels for the flow of great emotion whose intensity they cannot bear, and thus lose their minds. But for those who sincerely follow the path, perform the duties of life as worship, and keep up the various spiritual disciplines necessary for inner purification, spiritual life is perfectly safe.

We should all beware of the pitfalls of spiritual life, and strive for transformation of character which results in moral purity and strength, thus preparing ourselves for higher spiritual experiences. This alone can transmute the *tamas*-animal or demon and the *rajas*-man in us into the *sattva*-god which we potentially are, and lead us at last to the realization of the supreme Spirit — the highest goal of life.

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[31] Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1970), pp. 864-72

In the earlier chapters we have already discussed the details of the various disciplines necessary for the purification of our nature. Let us now dwell for a moment on what happens if we attain more and more *sattva.* The marks of one who is established in *sattva,* established in that purity which is a result of moral and spiritual disciplines, are: the body becomes light, one is no longer weighed down by so much body consciousness. As the senses become bright and strong, one attains a greater balance, the mind becomes wide-awake, and through the clarified intellect joy wells up. A new spiritual consciousness dawns. The soul becomes conscious of the Oversoul. The lower bird of the parable becomes conscious of the higher bird, the eternal witness. Disentangling itself from all false identification with ego, mind, senses and body, the soul rises to higher planes of consciousness until it attains union with the Oversoul. This is the culmination of spiritual activity.

The Upaniṣad declares: 'When the seer realizes the effulgent supreme Being, the Creator, the Lord and the Source of cosmic existence, then that wise one having shaken off all vice and virtue, attains the supreme stainless unity.'[32] And Srī Kṛṣṇa tells us in the Gītā: 'Free from all imperfections and doubts, with senses and mind controlled, engaged in the good of all beings, the sage attains absolute freedom both here and hereafter.'[33] This is the ideal of the Godman. In order to attain this great ideal we should bring about a transformation in our life. Spiritual ideal should not always remain an 'ideal' for us. Spiritual practice should not for ever remain a 'practice' for us, perfunctorily gone through. It should change our life. Our life must be transformed. One day or other, we too should attain the Godman's purity, divine consciousness and love.

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[32] यदा पश्यः पश्यते रुक्मवर्णं कर्तारमीशं पुरुषं ब्रह्मयोनिम्।
तदा विद्वान् पुण्यपापे विधूय निरञ्जनः परमं साम्यमुपैति ॥
Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, 3.1.3

[33] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 5.25

CHAPTER 29

REACTIONS TO SĀDHANĀ

Spiritual life is like an obstacle race

Śreyāṁsi bahu vighnāni ('The path to prosperity is full of obstacles'), says an Indian proverb. This is all the more true in spiritual life. One of the most distressing things that a spiritual aspirant discovers soon after turning to spiritual life is that this path is full of obstacles and difficulties, and to tread it means undergoing a good deal of suffering. He had turned away from worldly life and had taken to the path of prayer and meditation in the hope of getting supreme peace and fulfilment. He had read about the bliss of meditation, the joy of communion with God that the great saints of world religions seemed to have enjoyed. But when he tries to imitate them by practising meditation for long hours, he finds that he cannot sustain his efforts. At first everything seemed to go well with him. The aspirant seemed to enjoy his *japa*, meditation, austerities, etc. But then come the reactions.

People who meditate only for a few minutes a day may not know anything about these reactions. But those sincere aspirants who spend long hours in *japa*, prayer and contemplation are sure to face reactions coming from within them and also from without. Meditation is like churning the mind. When we try to concentrate the mind within, we profoundly disturb the unconscious part of the mind. Until we practise meditation we may not have even noticed the existence of the 'unconscious'. When we try to control it, it rebels, setting up disturbing currents in our mind. These inner disturbances affect our actions and attitudes towards others which, in turn, invite reactions from the society in which we live. With all these reactions — internal and external — the spiritual aspirant soon finds out that meditative life is not a bed of roses. Very often he finds that he had been happier before he turned to spiritual life. Many are so much discouraged that they stop their practice. Some continue it in a mechanical way out of a sense of duty. Only a rare few forge ahead with tremendous grit and fervour.

The conscious building up of our spiritual life is a very difficult task. Tempests are raging within and without, and you must be able to stand both. Then only the building up becomes possible. You all will have to pass through very difficult times during *sādhanā* and some will fall down by the wayside and be left behind. Your troubles will even increase for a time. Even outer obstacles in the form of unfavourable reactions from your friends and relatives will grow.

Sometimes even the body begins to revolt in every possible way. The mind becomes full of tension and rebellion. The nerves become high-strung. Old tendencies, old memories, old desires, get greater strength, and want to find expression on the physical plane. If we want to lead a spiritual life, we will have to pass through all these ordeals, through long periods of serious unsettlement, through terrible struggles with our desires and passions, before they are subdued. Life then looks like an obstacle race. There are no end of obstacles to be overcome, and no respite is given us for a long time. Everyone who intensely and sincerely follows the spiritual path will experience all this.

Nature of reactions

The little treatise *Aparokṣānubhūti,* supposed to have been written by Śaṁkarācārya, lists the obstacles that arise during *sādhanā* as follows:

> While practising *samādhi* there appears unavoidably many obstacles, such as lack of inquiry, idleness, desire for sense pleasure, sleep, dullness, distraction, tasting of joy, and the sense of blankness. One who desires the knowledge of Brahman should slowly get rid of such innumerable obstacles.[1]

Patañjali gives a similar list in his *Yoga-Sūtras:*

> Disease, mental laziness, doubt, lack of enthusiasm, lethargy,

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[1] Śaṁkarācārya, *Aparōkṣānubhūti,* verse 128

> clinging to sense enjoyments, false perception, non-attaining concentration, and falling away from the state when obtained, are the obstructing distractions.[2]

When we examine these lists of obstacles, we notice one important point, and that is, these obstacles are all created by ourselves. They arise within us and it is no use blaming others for it. They arise at various periods of our *sādhanā.*

It so happens that after several years of prolonged spiritual struggles we may get a spiritual experience. It is usually a temporary one, just a 'glimpse' of the inner Light. Many people then think that they have attained illumination, that there is no more necessity to purify their minds further. This is a very hasty conclusion as they themselves will soon find out.

Unless all the filth and foulness which have gathered in the mind are removed from all its nooks and corners, our problem is not really solved. If some light just enters a room through a chink in the door and the rest of the room remains filled with darkness and continues to be dirty, nothing is achieved. There is no real spiritual illumination if just a tiny bit of light enters our mind, and all the dirt and filth lying there is pushed away for the time being into some far-off dark corner. In such a case the man remains just what he was before he had this kind of 'glimpse'. Mere theories and philosophies do not help us in any way, however wonderful they may be. What is essential is the practical application, the sublimation, the removal of all the dirt lying hidden in the dark corners of the mind. The so-called perfect control of all the mental modifications (*vṛttis)* is not our immediate problem as some people would have it. Trying to stop all the *vṛttis* and make the mind blank will only lead to self-induced sleep in the beginner, and not to any form of real illumination. People who talk about the complete stopping of all the mental modifications at the very beginning of their spiritual life do not know what they mean.

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[2] Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra,* 1.30; See *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), Vol. I, p. 221.

Causes of reaction

A good deal of the obstacles that beset our spiritual path are created by our careless ways of living. There are people who practise meditation and at the same time indulge in overeating, oversleeping, overwork or meaningless and untidy work, talking too much or talking nonsense, and similar things. Irregular and irresponsible ways of life are incompatible with spiritual aspirations. Those who cannot follow a systematic way of life and regular good habits will find spiritual life impossible.

Apart from the above, the most usual cause of adverse reactions that come during *sādhanā* is insufficient mental purity. Most of the people who take to meditative life do not pay serious attention to its moral side. They are so eager to practise meditation that they try to bypass the tedious and uninteresting details of moral discipline. This is especially true in modern times when people have access to books dealing with higher aspects of spiritual life. Meditation, spiritual awakening, the rise of *kuṇḍalinī,* visions, etc. are all very fascinating and appear to be easy. But without strict ethical life they cannot be attained. And if somebody attains some higher experience by sheer effort, all the old impure tendencies will rise with great force and drag him down, very often to a nasty fall.

The mind is full of desires which are drawing it away in all directions. From the depths of the unconscious various kinds of impulses are constantly rising up keeping the mind restless. What most of the aspirants do is to control the mind in the midst of all these hidden and open troubles. In the beginning of spiritual life, when the enthusiasm of the aspirant is fresh, he may neglect these mental disturbances but sooner or later they make themselves felt. And since the early enthusiasm would have by then diminished to some extent, these obstacles appear to be all the more strong and violent.

Some aspirants in their spiritual fervour often suppress even useful and noble aspirations. They have gone to the other extreme of denying even legitimate and normal demands of the human soul for love and compassion and higher intellectual joys. In the beginning of spiritual life most of the aspirants need the help of good emotions to counteract bad ones. They need the help of studies, devotional music, social service, etc. to counteract their baser passions. By denying the former they fall a prey to the latter more easily. It is true that even noble and good emotions are also obstacles to the attainment of the highest degree of spiritual experience. But that is a problem only for the advanced aspirant. For the beginner who does not know what even a low degree of spiritual experience means, and who has not got the mental strength that comes from such a direct experience, studies, discharging the duties of life, service to holy men; etc. are necessary for a time. All the religious teachers wisely insist on the aspirant's following these. To cut oneself off egotistically from all these preliminary helps by relying on false inner strength is dangerous. As long as you have not tasted the bliss of true spiritual experience, the craving for lower pleasures is to be counteracted by some means or other. Meditation alone cannot always do this for a beginner. Of course, the case of aspirants who are endowed with exceptional purity of mind and intense longing for God is different. But such people are rare.

A third cause for adverse reactions in *sādhanā* is the aspirant's attempting too much. Many aspirants cannot in the beginning practise long hours of contemplation. They don't have the nervous strength to withstand the physical and mental strain caused by prolonged meditation. To make confusion worse confounded, many misguided people attempt too many things at a time. In addition to meditation they try their hand at *prāṇāyāma* (usually without proper guidance) and various forms of austerities. Depriving the body of normal food, rest and sleep will only add to the strain caused by sitting in one posture for a long time trying to control the mind. The result is exhaustion of mental powers or a nervous breakdown which often causes serious troubles. The aspirant must be realistic about his own powers — physical and mental. Nervous and high-strung people should not attempt too much meditation all of a sudden. They should go slowly. It is true that there is a small number of aspirants who are endowed with intense aspiration and also tremendous mental strength. But do not try to imitate them blindly. Study your own nature and learn how much of burden you can bear. Easily excitable people, those who have so many plans running riot in their brains, should avoid the temptation to sit and meditate for more than an hour at a stretch. In order to practise long hours of meditation one needs a cool temperament. Moreover, the brain should be nourished by the observance of strict *brahmacarya* or continence. Incontinent people will find their brains getting heated up easily.

There are other kinds of reactions in the case of aspirants who have already made some progress. The most common is the feeling of dryness or void. After enjoying good meditation for days and perhaps weeks, the aspirant feels that he has suddenly lost all interest in meditation. He finds it difficult to concentrate. He feels he is floating in a void. This is usually a reaction to vivid visualization. If you succeed in intensely visualizing your *Iṣṭa Devatā* and enjoying it for some time, you feel utterly lost when you find that you cannot visualize any more. You feel that you have lost contact with the reality of the Deity, and this creates great anguish. It is always good to remember in such cases that the inner soul is ever in contact with God, the Soul of all souls. Even when your imagination has failed you, you actually have lost nothing. During these dry periods, however trying they are, one should hold on to the centre of one's consciousness and practise *japa.*

There is yet another cause of reactions in *sādhanā,* namely the shifting of the centre of one's consciousness. Before turning to spiritual life, the consciousness of an average man moves along the lower centres. His normal life is concerned with eating, sleeping and sense enjoyment. Turning to spiritual life, he finds he can no longer allow himself to be carried away by lower thoughts and activities. He feels the need for higher thoughts, and this means shifting of the centre of consciousness. When you try to shift the centre of your consciousness to the level of the heart or the head, you find that you cannot hold on to these centres for long. You then find that you have no fixed centre of consciousness. This results in profound unsettlement of the mind.

To live in the world and deal with objects without any inner reference point is a very disturbing experience. The aspirant finds that he can neither meditate on the Deity in a higher centre of consciousness, nor dwell in the lower centres and enjoy the world as he formerly used to do. When the ego consciousness wanders without a fixed point, the aspirant becomes less sure of himself, and then his character and conduct may become unsteady for a time. This is an unavoidable stage in the course of spiritual progress. The problem is how quickly one can overcome this state. Some aspirants continue in this state for a long time, swinging between the sublime and the ridiculous. Some others go back to the old ways permanently and keep their centre of consciousness in the lower centres as in former days.

Connect your consciousness with the divine Consciousness

Spiritual consciousness should be an extension of our individual consciousness. We must stand firmly on the ground of our own consciousness and then have spiritual consciousness. The point must first be a very definite one and then be in tune with the whole circle. Without a very definite pointhood no experience of the circle is possible. Only when I *am,* God *is.* I am the spirit free from all troubles; this 'I' is to be strengthened. The other 'I', the limited one, that continually creates troubles, is to be eliminated. We must retain our consciousness, but the centre of our consciousness must be shifted from the false ego to the true self. We must always be rooted in our higher consciousness. Sometimes we want to float in the Infinite without being rooted in our own consciousness. There should never be a time when we remain uprooted. Our roots must be struck somewhere. When we take our roots away from the false ground, we must at once take root in our true self, and not allow ourselves to remain uprooted.

When devotees think of their own object of meditation and see the form vividly, they must be also able to establish the relationship; otherwise, they will float in the world of imagination. One must be able to connect one's consciousness with the consciousness of the *Iṣṭam*, one's object of meditation. If one does not do this, serious troubles and unsettlement may follow, and the object of the practice is not attained. If you do not have the positive living presence of your *Iṣṭam,* you feel you float in the air, and you become uprooted. Your own consciousness loses its base. There is no doubt at all that you should uproot yourselves from the false ground as swiftly and as decisively as possible. Great stress is to be laid on the positive presence of your *Iṣṭam.* Then you also feel an inner peace. The *Iṣṭam* is not an imagination. The presence of the *Iṣṭam* is something real after you have made the form vivid. This is a very important point. If the practice is performed in the right way, you will feel infinite strength and calm and stillness, a deep inner sense of peace as if a pitcher of bliss were placed in your heart. Nothing can ruffle you then in any way.

Many of the present bad effects of your practices come from your making the form of your *Iṣṭam* vivid without establishing the necessary relationship, without connecting your own consciousness with the consciousness of your *Iṣṭam.* In spiritual life there always comes such a crisis. It comes to all who perform their practices intensely and regularly, conscientiously. It comes to all if they really advance, and really do meditation energetically. No one is spared this unsettlement and this crisis, but then they should ask the spiritual guide what to do, and discuss with him about their practices. If no difficulties come at all, as it happens in some cases, there is something wrong; their practices are not effective.

In the case of a *jñānī* the crises are very less virulent. There is more of balance and discrimination, though there too, some crises are sure to appear. But always remember, both for the *bhakta* and for the *jñānī,* spiritual consciousness must under all circumstances be an extension of the individual consciousness.

Do not give up your effort

To all of us these reactions come — physical and mental — and along with our spiritual practice we must increase our capacity to bear these reactions. Many people break down under these reactions. Many become completely unsettled for a time. They become worse than they were before taking up spiritual practice. If you want to shift the centre of your consciousness from the lower to higher centres, you have to pass through periods of unsettlement. While people are leading a worldly life they do not become really aware of all these phases, but spiritual practice, if properly performed, always stirs up different subconscious currents, and this leads to unsettlement. Very often in such cases there is no strength left; sometimes there comes a long period of disturbance and vacillation, and even moral instability.

When they are in these depressing states, people tend to give up all spiritual practice instead of vigorously increasing it. If they give up, they are gone spiritually. They cannot avoid a nasty fall from which they may not be able to recover for a long time. So giving up one's spiritual practice at such times is very bad and very dangerous. Cling to it all the more. Try to make it more intense, more effective. There should be a calm, steady, one-pointed and dogged performance of meditation and *japa* coupled with strict fulfilment of ethical culture. All those who do not do this will be eliminated sooner or later, and will not be able to get anywhere near the goal.

He who does not fulfil the conditions of *yama* and *niyama*[3] will not attain anything. His energy will be too small to enable him to stand the stress and pressure bearing down upon him from all sides. That is why no aspirant can afford to waste energy unnecessarily through physical and mental channels. The old teachers knew perfectly well why they had to prescribe the disciplines of *yama* and *niyama*, why they had to be so strict about morality. If these rules are not fulfilled, the result can be only a nervous breakdown, a greater weakening of all our powers and a greater slavery to the senses. Do not think these are mere theories. We too have passed through these early stages of spiritual life, and we have seen and heard so much from our great teachers. This is not mere book knowledge found in some musty old volumes of old traditions.

The first period of *sādhanā,* when one has to stand all these tremendous reactions, is a period of great trial. One must have patience and dogged perseverance; then will come better days. Tremendous mental energy is to be kept under control, otherwise we cannot get the power to move. Even if we have a strong body and a strong mind, there comes a time for us when we feel terribly unsettled and nervous. First there is the period of fighting with unruly impulses and imaginations, then the period of fighting with mental automatisms, intellectual habits; but then follows the period of poise, peace and inner harmony.

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[3] See Chapters 9, 17 and 18.

Some of these reactions are of course avoidable if the aspirant carefully follows the instructions of his teacher, and remains in the company of holy men. But if you don't feel any kind of reaction at all, if you find that your spiritual life is all smooth sailing right from the beginning, in all probability, there is something wrong with your *sādhanā.* Most probably your spiritual practice is not deep or intense. It may be going on mechanically.

However, this does not mean struggles and confusions are sure signs of your spiritual intensity. Non-spiritual factors often get mixed up with spiritual striving. But the chaff soon gets separated from the grain. Those who have genuine spiritual aspiration continue the struggles until they emerge successful and victorious. Those who have artificially stimulated their spiritual appetite soon stop after some initial show of fight, or may even end up in a mental hospital.

The aspirant needs sympathetic treatment

During this period of his *sādhanā* an aspirant should be treated very kindly and with great understanding, because the unsettlement is not his fault, if one may say so, but the consequence of his spiritual practice. It is no use criticizing him for it. Let us not judge him. After he has passed through these periods, he will stand as a man among men. These periods will come to all of us, only at different times. And this is lucky because all these experiences enable some of us to help others. Swami Vivekananda once remarked, 'I fought with my Master for six long years with the result that I know every inch of the way.'[4] His intense spiritual struggles taught him all the difficulties that aspirants have to overcome. This knowledge enabled him to guide thousands of people.

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[4] Sister Nivedita, *The Master as I Saw Him,* (Calcutta: The Udbodhan Office, 1972), p. 12

Many aspirants get terrified thinking that spiritual life, if it brings about such serious unsettlement, must be very harmful and dangerous. No doubt it can be so for the careless. Those who are unwilling to pay a high price need not try spiritual life. Breaking through the prison walls of instincts and impure memories to the broad daylight of spiritual consciousness is an adventure reserved only for the strong. In the meantime, an aspirant cannot be allowed to move in any company he likes, in the company of those who do not lead a perfectly chaste life. He is still in his spiritual childhood and adolescence, so he cannot take the risks a grown-up can take without any real danger. Do not think you belong to the group of spiritual grown-ups already. Most of you do not. Do not feel too sure of yourselves!

Spiritual life cannot be lived on artificial grounds. You cannot do spiritual practice just as you take physical exercise. Our life should always be a natural life, but natural life means a life in tune with our higher nature, not with our lower animal nature. It is just the opposite of what the worldly-minded understand by the term 'spiritual life'. True spiritual life is the result of soul hunger. It is the result of an intense desire to rise to a higher plane.

All of you, sometime or other, will have to pass through these reactions. Do not get panicky when these come, but be wide-awake. The form of the reaction may be different, but the reactions cannot be avoided if you perform *sādhanā* intensely. And always try to help the fellow aspirant who is passing through the period of unsettlement. Always be kind and considerate to him.

When the Lord Himself has taken charge of a devotee, He makes him pass through all these trials. He will force on you these tremendous struggles — whether you like it or not. So you must welcome them and learn your lesson. Facing these struggles and overcoming them are far more important than getting peace of mind which eludes you anyway.

Spiritual life can be intensified, the tempo of practice can be hastened, spiritual hunger can be stimulated, and thereby the period of spiritual struggles can be shortened. But you have to pass through all the reactions and painful mental transformations, though you can pass through them very quickly instead of taking a very long time. The more intense your *sādhanā*, the greater the reactions, but the shorter their duration. Swami Abhedananda used to say that in his life he had passed through the experience of ten lives.

All *yogīs* try to shorten their period of spiritual struggles by intensifying their *sādhanā*. They have to face great reactions, obstacles and temptations but they are endowed with such tremendous grit and strength that they cheerfully go through these fiery ordeals; whereas worldly people prepare a long-range plan of going slowly at a snail's pace in spiritual life and have to be satisfied with mere reading and talking.

Hold on to your higher centre of consciousness

All these spiritual struggles trouble you only as long as you have not discovered your own centre of spiritual consciousness. As soon as you discover it, the battle is more than half won. You then become sure of your path and this takes away a lot of uncertainty and tension. Afterwards the struggles become subtler but less violent and less manifest outwardly. You are then able to conduct the inner warfare with greater poise and strength. Every true struggle has its reward.

You should always hold on to the centre of your consciousness whatever be the extenuating circumstances. When a trouble arises, go to your centre of consciousness and stay there until the trouble is over. When temptation in any form approaches you, go there. When any evil impulse wants to take shape, go there. When you get kicks and blows from the outside world, go there. Keep it fixed at all times, make it your very home. Without shifting the centre of consciousness, it is an impossible task to gain control over the mind. And you cannot efficiently shift the centre of your consciousness and keep it fixed, change the thought currents and make them flow along higher channels, unless you perform your *sādhanā*, your *japa* and meditation, steadily and intensely for a long time.

Sometimes, owing to our old habits, the centre of our consciousness goes down after remaining up for a while and then all kinds of thoughts peculiar to that centre begin to bubble up. So you must prepare yourself to face such situations. Always think of yourself as a soul, a self-luminous entity separate from body and mind. After your usual meditation have some set readings from the Upaniṣads or from the monistic stanzas of Śaṁkarācārya.[5] While repeating these passages about the real nature of your Self, try to drive these ideas deep into your mind.

Follow a combination of the negative and positive methods of spiritual practice. Deny the body and all that is connected with it, but assert the Self intensely, vigorously, with your whole being. For many beginners this brings about a headache. But then, there are so many other things which bring us headaches. Why not have this one for a change?

The pilgrim's progress

The whole course of our life is to be changed. We must undo what we have done. We have, as it were, thrown our friends out, and then allowed our enemies to come in and live with us. So there should be counteractions and counter-thoughts to undo our former bad actions and thoughts, not only during our spiritual practice but also at other times. The task is a long and difficult one and requires great heroism and perseverance. Spiritual life is not a bed of roses, but a real uphill task.

Our human personality consists of both good and evil. The evil is to be eliminated step by step and the good fostered. In the course of the evolution of the soul, both good and evil come up. The aspirant should face the reality and stimulate the higher expressions of life. Let us profit even by our mistakes, and instead of brooding over them too much, let us strengthen ourselves and avoid their recurrence by all the means in our power. If we slip, let it make us humble and more dependent on the Divine who is the real source of our strength and support.

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[5] See Swami Yatiswarananda, *The Divine Life* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1973), pp. 276-297.

Everyone in the East or in the West has to pass through struggles. In the East the spiritual and ethical culture has been maintained in an unbroken way. This helps some aspirants, no doubt, but there are many who do not profit by it at all. So it is no use complaining that in the West spiritual life is very difficult. What is difficult is your own nature, and you have got to change it somehow or other.

During the course of the soul's progress, instinctive goodness passes through conscious goodness with struggles, and then to natural goodness without any conflict. So conscious struggle is a stage in our evolution and does not necessarily mean a set-back. This however does not justify all forms of backsliding.

Partial success in our moral and spiritual life gives us an incentive towards greater and greater success, but it should never make us think that perfection has been attained. It means that although we have made some progress in purifying ourselves by controlling our lower nature and tendencies, much of the impurities and evil tendencies are still there and are to be controlled and finally eliminated.

All along the period of our ethical and spiritual practice we must have an abiding faith in our potentialities, in our capacity to move nearer and nearer to our goal. But we should never take the potential to be actual, unless it has been fully realized in life, unless it has brought about a complete transformation in our thoughts and activities.

Mere dreaming of spiritual experience is not enough. We may dream of getting lots of money. But we should always bear in mind, that with the money we get in a dream it is not possible for us to buy food and appease our hunger in the actual world.

We sow the wind and we have got to reap it as whirlwind. All the suppressed whirlwinds will come up. All the bad pictures lying hidden in the mind will get developed sooner or later. We have got to 'face the brute' [6], see things as they are, and then see the Divine in all things. In Him is all this play of Māyā going on, hiding Him altogether from our view. We have got to see through this Māyā. Our spiritual practice which includes also the performance of the duties of life, enables us to develop a sort of mental X-ray by virtue of which we are able to see the phenomenal nature of things and also the Reality appearing as the phenomenon.

It is a hard, long struggle which appears to be never-ending. The more we advance, the subtler and stronger becomes this struggle. And in the course of the merciless self-analysis which we have to pass through, most awful things are revealed — things to which ordinarily we give big, high-sounding names. Our so-called selfless relationships and human feelings and sentiments are more or less based on the lower self. Even our love for God, devotion for Godmen and affection for fellow-devotees are to a great extent based on selfish considerations. But at the root of all these, there is always a divine element which is mixed up with much of non-divine things. The gold is to be separated from the dross. That is the task of spiritual life.

By noticing the different elements in our sentiments and also the reactions of these sentiments on the mind and the centres of consciousness, we can very often find out their true quality and value. Feelings associated with the higher centres may get connected to lower thought planes and may even be debased into passions of the worst kind. Hence we must always be on our guard during our association with people. And men and women, as you know, are not always what they seem to be. The more we study ourselves and others with great scrutiny, the more do we realize this fact, sometimes to our sorrow.

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[6] There is an anecdote connected with this phrase. One day, in the course of his wanderings all over India, as Swami Vivekananda was returning from the temple of Mother Durgā in Benaras, he was pursued by a troop of monkeys. He at first tried to flee fearing that they might harm him. But the monkeys came on his heels. Suddenly he heard the voice of an old *sannyāsin* calling out to him, 'Stop, always face the brutes!' Swamiji turned, his fear gone; and seeing him defiant the monkeys scurried away. Years later, in a lecture given in New York, he referred to this incident and pointed out the moral of the story: 'That is a lesson for all life — face the terrible, face it boldly. Like the monkeys, the hardships of life fall back when we cease to flee before them.' — *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1970), Vol. I, pp. 338-339.

Here is an important point to note. When we judge ourselves we should always take as the standard our weakest point and not the strongest. Just as the strength of a chain depends on its weakest link, so our weakness determines our spiritual progress, our joys and sorrows. We should not be too proud or over-confident about our strong qualities. Many of our difficulties come from this source.

Let us make the best use of our time even when we pass through a period of uncertainty. When the power of evil becomes too strong, we have to wait until it exhausts itself to some extent. Knowing that better days are ahead of us, let us carry on with our normal duties of life and our spiritual practice. Let us make the best use of the divine Grace bestowed on us, and try to attain something stable and permanent in our life so that we may hold on to that when we feel that the grace is withdrawn from us temporarily. Do not seek security and peace in the phenomenal world. It is always changing. If you seek happiness in it, you cannot avoid getting unhappiness also.

Really speaking, we have no security on the plane of mere sentiments, however essential they may be for the evolution of our soul. Our feelings must be based on the divine Consciousness and also connected with It. Then alone do we get real stability and become free from fear. Of course, we can attain to this ideal only by proceeding step by step, by passing through many a failure and defeat.

How to face spiritual struggles and reactions

Every one of us has got to pass through ups and downs, rises and falls. Let these changes bring home to us the necessity of rising higher and higher until we reach that state when we go beyond the *guṇas* and attain to the Transcendental.

Go on with your spiritual practice regularly, steadily, without interruption even if you don't feel any enthusiasm for it. By breaking your *sādhanā* in the middle, you don't solve your problems. Interruptions only retard our progress. Whether you are in a good mood or not, spend at least one hour in the morning and again in the evening in meditation and prayer. The flow of your spiritual stream must be maintained. With an effort of the will this can be done, nay, it *must* be done. The aspirant must resist and insist: he must resist his inner impulse to stop his *sādhanā* for some time, and must insist on maintaining its continuity. Reactions and obstacles come as tests of our will power. By overcoming them, we gain great strength of mind.

The Lord's grace is on us, though we do not realize it. We should pray to Him to protect and guide us in the midst of all our strivings and struggles, and to take us nearer and nearer to Him. Prayer is an important aid. You can pray when you are unable to meditate in the proper way. This gives great inner solace and we find our difficulties disappearing soon. Without worrying about small slips and falls, the aspirant should march onwards making the Divine the centre of his being. To such devoted souls failures are stepping stones to success. They pass through many a trial, and come out of them victorious in the end.

We must also try to intensify our faith in the Divine, who, as Sri Ramakrishna very aptly says, comes towards us ten steps, if we try to move towards Him one step. The mother allows the child to go on with the play, but she has to rush towards the child who, tired of the play, has begun to cry for her, and crawl towards her.[7] Such is also the case with His devotees who want to approach Him in their weak, human ways.

You may feel depressed at times. That is unavoidable. On such occasions please try to establish the inner contact with the Divine, and the mood of depression will be replaced by a higher mood. You should always try your best to maintain the inner contact with the Divine. There may be a natural rise and fall in the mood, but if we try to remain in tune with the

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[7] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), pp. 79, 179

Infinite, something of the higher mood will always remain with us. Even if it apparently disappears at times, do not feel upset. Calmly and quietly raise yourself to the higher plane of consciousness, and re-establish the contact and then everything will be all right.

Sometimes owing to our past impressions coming up to the conscious plane from the domain of the subconscious or unconscious where they lie hidden, there may be a mental and even a physiological disturbance. This is very troublesome and annoying. But we should not get unbalanced. We must take things as they come, maintaining the attitude of a witness. We should try to see the Divine in them, try to realize the eternal Medium in which all sensations, all vibrations, all thoughts manifest themselves. And then the Divine becomes real in the primary sense, and the forms appear to be shadows and lose their attraction and charm. When this is done, mental and physiological harmony are regained. If you find that your brain is getting clouded, pray to the Divine and meditate on Him, try to feel that the real soul in you is like a divine spark that is a part of the infinite ocean of Light; and then the higher mood will return again.

We should try to hold on to the Divine under all circumstances. *Japa* is of great help during moods of depression. One finds great relief in repeating the holy Name audibly to oneself. You may hum it to yourself and also try to think of the Divine when you feel an inner void and restlessness. When the bliss of realization is not available, we have to be satisfied with the joy of thinking of Him — the Beloved — the Soul of our soul.

During all these struggles both on the gross and subtle planes, we should try to dwell on the holy thoughts as much as possible and thus drive away unholy ones. But sometimes our imaginations grow morbid, and unholy pictures become very vivid in spite of ourselves. In such a case, while repeating the holy *mantra* and trying to visualize the holy Form, we should take the position of a witness (*sākṣī*) or spectator towards evil thoughts and detach ourselves from their entanglements. During the moments of forgetfulness we may identify ourselves with the evil thoughts and feel affected both mentally and physically, though not actually doing anything bad. But as we become more and more watchful and practise non-identification, we can keep them at a distance even when they make their appearance before us.

When we are in a 'personal' mood and long to come in contact with human personalities, the divine Personality gives us a great support. The bubble finds a great support from the wave, when the ocean (which is more real than both the wave and the bubble) appears to be an abstraction. Through the touch of the wave the bubble again becomes conscious of its connection with the ocean.

But when we are in an 'impersonal' mood or find ourselves unable to establish contact with our Chosen Deity, we may practise the attitude of a witness.

People who run away from the difficulties of life weaken themselves and become unfit for spiritual progress. Those who choose to face their troubles trusting in the Divine, feel great inward strength. If you have directly come in contact with the divine current and have also unfurled the sail of your devotion, the breeze of divine Grace is sure to take you forward, even in the midst of the storms and tempests of the world, which are inevitable to everybody. The world is after all a training ground, and not a pleasure garden as we often wrongly suppose.

Different weapons in the struggle

A really introspective mind always brings home to us all the events that are taking place within ourselves. We must become wide-awake and fully aware of every thought that rises or wants to rise in our mind. Without getting control over our mind, we cannot advance and without becoming aware of what is taking place in our mind, we will never be able to control it. So this is one of the very first steps in spiritual life.

At present, one part of our mind wants sense enjoyment and sense life, while another part does not crave for it any longer. You must try to develop an aversion for all things that attract your senses or are apt to rouse old associations in you.

The moment you get real dispassion for all worldly enjoyments, the problem is solved. Then you come to taste something that is sweeter than these so-called pleasures of the senses, which are very insignificant, after all. If you feel that temptation in some form or other is trying to sweep you off your feet, consider the evil effects of those bad thoughts, or dwell on the life of a great soul who is the embodiment of all purity and renunciation. Healthy pride very often helps us in our striving: 'I am a devotee of the Lord, I want to follow the spiritual path; so faint-heartedness does not become me at all.' It is always a sign of weakness and cowardice to give in to one's desires and sense impulses. If you cannot get control over yourself, then go to some fellow aspirants, divert your mind, have talks with them on some holy topic or other. Do not allow yourself to be alone and go on brooding over the objects of desire. This only makes matters worse, and then you are almost sure to slip your foot and come to grief. Force yourself, if you can, to read and study something elevating in such a case, whether your mind likes it or not.

At first, meditation, if done properly, stirs up the whole subconscious mind, and awful things lying hidden there come up, as a matter of course. So the aspirant must never feel afraid. The indrawn mind becomes terribly sensitive, and experiences that seemed to have left no mark in the mind, are found to have made deep scars and lines. All such impressions must be completely effaced. And in order to do that, one must face them boldly.

Your moral fibre must be strengthened at the same time. Try to cultivate the attitude of a witness. Cease to identify yourself with your desires and cravings and with outside events. Even if your mind goes on raving madly, just watch it and try to dissociate yourself from it. You are eternally the witness of all your mental states. Never identify yourself with your thoughts. For the beginner this is a very difficult step, but once it has been taken, everything becomes more and more natural, less and less strained.

Japa is a great help, and so is meditation on some holy Personality. The Form is a gateway to the Formless, the all-pervading Spirit. Pray to a divine Form and try to visualize It. Then, if any undesirable form rises in your mind, you can remove it with the help of the form of your *Iṣṭam*; merge it into That.

Never forget to give yourself a good injection of Vedānta. It is very helpful. First of all think of your own potential divinity and that of all other forms, even of those that create troubles for you. If we ourselves are pure and holy by nature, we must manifest this even physically, not merely mentally, in this very life. Herein lies the test of all true spiritual struggle. There must be realization in both physical and mental life. Our spiritual practices must help us in bringing about the needed harmony between the physical and the ideal. Spiritual life means tremendous steadiness and singleness of purpose. With the help of these alone can success be achieved.

You should not, under any circumstances, be sorry or depressed on account of the change of your mood or the rising of wrong thoughts in you. It is natural. Now, through steady practice you have to make higher spiritual experiences your own. We have to bring the superconsciousness into our conscious state, realize the One in the many, manifest divine knowledge, purity and unity, on the mental and physical planes. This is only a question of time, if we follow the spiritual path steadily with faith in the Lord. Remember Swami Vivekananda's bracing little poem:

> If the sun by the cloud is hidden a bit,
> If the welkin shows but gloom,
> Still hold on yet a while, brave heart,
> The victory is sure to come.
>
> No winter was but summer came behind,
> Each hollow crests the wave,
> They push each other in light and shade;
> Be steady then and brave.[8]

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[8] *The Complete Works*, op. cit., Vol. IV, 1972, pp. 389-390

CHAPTER 30

REALITY OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

Modern doubts

'When we think of spiritual realization, the question arises: Are these experiences real? I knew a clergyman in New York. One day when he told his daughter about something spiritual, she asked him in surprise: 'Papa, is that real, or are you only preaching?' We hear of so many types of spiritual experiences, and we always wonder: Are they real?

There are sceptics who always try to argue away everything. There is the realist who holds that all such experiences are caused by overstimulated nerves. William James used to call some of these people 'medical materialists'. One of these said of a great mystic that 'he had visions because he was sexually degenerate'; another had spiritual experiences because 'he suffered from hysteria'. According to him it is only the neurotic who wishes to dissociate himself from the ways of the world and reach a different plane of consciousness.

When Sri Ramakrishna was undergoing rigorous spiritual disciplines, many people thought that his brain was deranged. When he met one of his *gurus*, the Bhairavi Brahmani, he told her about the people's opinion. To that, the lady, who was herself a spiritually advanced soul, replied: 'Look here. Everybody in the world is mad about some object. The only difference is that you are mad after God. Others are mad about worldly things.' [1]

There is a great difference between a victim of hysteria and the true mystic who has attained the power of a new vision, the 'divine eye'. Professor William James, in his book *Varieties of Religious Experience*, points out that true religious experience comes from a deeper layer of consciousness than that in which we dwell habitually. He speaks of the practice of Yoga as being capable of producing mystical insight.[2] Yoga helps us to connect our conscious mind with the superconscious. The *yogī* has learned to overcome the obstructions of bodily life, and has entered a state in which he comes face to face with the supreme Spirit.

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[1] See Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1970), p. 186.

The opposition of scientists to religious ideals is diminishing. There are modern scientists who are coming to recognize a plane of spiritual experience which cannot be measured by the usual laboratory techniques. Many of the scientists have realized the limitations of empirical science, and are in search of means of knowing the Reality which lies beyond sense experience. There has been a new interest in the works of the great mystics of the world. The experiences of the mystics of the world religions have been too well authenticated to be brushed aside as fantasies.

Throughout the ages there have been a number of great mystics in both the East and the West. Some of them had very high mystical illumination. Traditional religions are content with some preliminary rituals. In Christianity the primary ritual is baptism. Now, there are many doctrines of baptism. One sect holds that unless there is full immersion in water a man cannot be saved. Another holds that one may just get as much sense of inner purification by having the form of the cross made on the forehead with holy water. Still others stress inner purification and see no necessity for outward baptism at all. In China, once there was held a missionary service at which a Baptist spoke, then a Methodist, and finally an English Quaker. One Chinese said to another: 'Each of these Christians is giving us a separate creed. Can you tell me what is the difference between them?' 'I don't think there is any difference,' replied his friend, 'except that some have big washing, some have little washing and some have no washing.'

It is bigotry to make so much of the little differences in the outward forms of religion which have only created various sects antagonistic to one another. Instead of turning to sects, let us rather turn to the real mystics, who, by undergoing spiritual disciplines, have realized the ultimate Truth, and have applied that in their lives. Sri Ramakrishna used to say:

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[2] William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, Random House), pp. 72, 391, 418, 475

> Some have heard of milk, some have seen milk, and some have drunk milk. He who has merely heard of it is 'ignorant'. He who has seen it is a *jñānī*. But he who has drunk it has *vijñāna*, that is to say, a fuller knowledge of it.[3]

'Sir, have you seen God?'

As a college student, Narendra, who later on became Swami Vivekananda, lost faith in God. He approached several religious leaders and asked them whether any one of them had actually had direct experience of God. Finally destiny led him to the presence of Sri Ramakrishna, the great modern mystic and prophet. The first question that the young college student bluntly put to the sage was, 'Sir, have you seen God?' Without a moment's hesitation and with the power of truth ringing in every word, the sage told the young man, 'Yes, I see Him just as I see you here, only in a much intenser sense.' In the course of Narendra's second visit, the Master decided to give that impatient young man burning with a tremendous spiritual hunger, a taste of direct spiritual experience. At the mystic touch of the Master, the disciple at once had a strange experience: he saw the room with all the objects in it whirling around him and disappearing into a void into which he too was about to merge. Unacquainted as he was with such an experience, he shouted: 'Oh, what are you doing to me? I have parents at home.' With a smile the Master immediately brought him back to normal consciousness.[4] Narendra soon began to practise spiritual disciplines under the guidance of Sri Ramakrishna and was in due course blessed with innumerable visions and experiences including *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the highest spiritual experience. Years later, as Swami Vivekananda, he told his followers:

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[3] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 368

[4] See Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974), pp. 47-48.

What right has a man to say he has a soul if he does not feel it, or that there is a God if he does not see Him? If there is a God we must see Him, if there is a soul we must perceive it, otherwise it is better not to believe. It is better to be an outspoken atheist than a hypocrite. The modern idea, on the one hand, with the 'learned' is that religion and metaphysics and all search after a Supreme Being are futile; on the other hand, with the semi-educated, the idea seems to be that these things really have no basis, their only value consists in the fact that they furnish strong motive powers for doing good to the world. If men believe in a God, they may become good and moral, and so make good citizens. We cannot blame them for holding such ideas, seeing that all the teaching these men get is simply to believe in an eternal rigmarole of words, without any substance behind them. They are asked to live upon words; can they do it? If they could, I should not have the least regard for human nature. Man wants truth, wants to experience truth for himself; when he has grasped it, realized it, felt it within his heart of hearts, then alone, declare the Vedas, would all doubts vanish, all darkness be scattered, and all crookedness be made straight. 'Ye children of immortality, even those who live in the highest sphere, the way is found; there is a way out of all this darkness, and that is by perceiving Him who is beyond all darkness; there is no other way.' [5]

Second-hand knowledge is not enough

We do not see the Truth clearly because of our tremendous mental impurity. We must strive and remove the dirt of our mind. Others can give us only the necessary suggestions. But we have to change our conduct of life accordingly.

We must get a mental telescope. This capacity lies dormant in every one of us. It does not come from outside, nor can it be added to our nature. But it is something we have neglected all these years. As our ordinary mind becomes purer and purer, we discover a subtle spiritual mind behind it, called the *buddhi* or the Heart. With its unfoldment a new vision opens. It is the 'divine eye' — *divya cakṣu* — mentioned in the eleventh chapter of the *Gītā*.[6] Spiritual life means the development of this divine eye.

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[5] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), Vol. I, pp. 127-128

We should never think that we are all endowed with perfect senses and that what we experience with the senses is real and permanent. The first exercise of discrimination, the first dawn of knowledge, reveals to us that this world is changing constantly, and can give us no permanent peace. A radio set receives endless electrical waves but our senses cannot perceive them directly. In the same way, our gross mind cannot know the subtle spiritual waves emanating from the soul, from God. But when this mind is purified, turned inward and concentrated, we discover subtler and subtler worlds within us.

Mere reading, discussion, and nice feelings are not enough, and those who are not prepared to take up actual spiritual practice in full earnest had better turn to something else. They will never make any progress in spiritual life. People are so beggarly that the moment they get a nice elevating feeling or thought, they think they have achieved something great or important. They have really no idea of what real spiritual life is, and where it really begins.

A preacher had a brother who was a doctor. They looked very much alike. One day a friend stopped one of them on the way and congratulated him on the success of his fine sermons. The man replied: 'I am not the one who preaches, I am the one who practises!' Preaching religion is not enough. Talking about spiritual life is not enough. We must do some real spiritual practice. Most people fight shy of spiritual practice, but what does spiritual life mean if it does not train our faculties in a way that enables us to perceive spiritual truths, to realize our true nature? What does Christ's message, Buddha's message, Śrī Kṛṣṇa's message, Sri Ramakrishna's message mean? They show us the way to our own realization; but if we do not experience the Truth, they are totally valueless for us. For lack of spiritual tradition, Christ's message is no longer realized in the West and only the empty shell has remained. A Christian must attain to the Christ consciousness, before he can understand Christ. A Buddhist must attain to the Buddha consciousness before he can understand Buddha.

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[6] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 11.8

Touchstones of religion

In the beginning of our spiritual practice we do not get any spiritual experience, because that is only the 'scavenging' period when loads and loads of dirt and impurities have to be removed. Evil thoughts arise even if the mind has already been made strong to a certain extent, but then they no longer harm us and can easily be conquered. If a boat has a good and experienced helmsman it can face the storm without the fear of being lost. Unless this phenomenal world has been effaced completely from our mind, desires and passions, attraction and aversion, can never be annihilated in their subtlest form.

Until then, the passions may still rise in the mind, but if we have strengthened our moral fibre through spiritual culture, we will be able to withstand them and drive them away. Strengthening of the moral fibre itself is a sign of spiritual progress. Until we feel the coming of grace, we must strive. Self-effort is indispensable in spiritual life. We can never attain to real self-surrender unless we have really striven to our utmost.

A vision of the right kind can be had only when we possess a very strong, healthy, chaste, pure body that is really able to stand all the reactions consequent upon such a vision; and when we possess a wholly purified and dispassionate mind and true spiritual insight, it makes us feel we are neither the body nor the mind, nor men or women, but spiritual entities distinct from all these.

True vision, even with form, always contains the spiritual element and reflects the glory of Brahman, the ultimate Reality. And remember, it is always better to be a dualist with realization than be a monist without realization. True vision with form is a step leading to higher and higher stages of spirituality, but theoretical monism without any realization leaves you nowhere. The Absolute of the non-dualist is very far off, and what we are concerned with is qualified non-dualism at best, the doctrine which holds that we are all parts of an infinite

Whole. If all the senses are stilled and are perfectly controlled, and if the mind too, is in that state, then alone true vision becomes possible, not otherwise.

There is a very marked difference between the hallucination of an overheated brain and the gaining of a true vision. One test is that we attain more purity and greater dispassion, holiness, and concentration, as a result of a true spiritual experience. Our spirit of surrender increases and the soul gets attuned to the Divine. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'The breeze of God's grace is always blowing. All that you have to do is to unfurl your sails.' [7] When the devotee has caught a glimpse of the Transcendental, he no longer bothers about the right breeze — whether it is a hot breeze or a cold breeze or no breeze at all. He knows that the current of divine power is carrying him forward in the right direction.

Two other tests of vision are: Bliss and certitude. True spiritual experience produces an ineffable peace, joy and a sense of fulfilment. Something in us then knows it is true, for it carries with it its own unmistakable light and conviction. Those who have led an absolutely pure, chaste and disciplined life cannot be easily misled by false visions. True spiritual experience is its own proof.

However, many over-zealous spiritual aspirants are misled by false lights in the beginning. How are they to decide that they are proceeding along the right path? According to Vedānta there are three touchstones of spirituality. These are, scripture (*śruti*), experience (*anubhava*), and reason (*yukti*). This idea is brought out in a famous passage in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*: 'This Ātman is to be heard about, meditated upon, sought after, and finally realized.' [8] The first great help is the guidance we get from the scriptures or an illumined teacher. It is not enough to read the scriptures as a form of duty. One should think deeply about the meaning they contain and try to get a firm conviction about the possibility of realizing the Truth. There is truth in the assertion that the very moment the right teacher instructs a really qualified pupil, the latter realizes the Truth in a flash. But the aspirant must first become really qualified through strict ethical culture.

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[7] *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1975), p. 205

[8] . . .आत्मा वा अरे द्रष्टव्यः श्रोतव्यो मन्तव्यो निदिध्यासितव्यो मैत्रेयि. . . ॥
Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 2.4.5 and 4.5.6

The most important point to note in spiritual life is that one should have a direct experience of Truth. The so-called blind faith cannot be the criterion of religious life. Subscribing to some dogma is not religion (as it is understood in the West). Religion is realization. Religious truths should be verified in one's life, not once but again and again. A little glimpse of the Truth is not the end, though it is better than nothing at all. Moreover, our spiritual experiences should tally with the scriptures.

Finally, both scripture and experience should be subjected to reasoning. This not only clarifies the ideas we get from scriptures but also enlarges our knowledge of ourselves. The best kind of reasoning is self-analysis. Reasoning can also be undertaken to determine what is everlasting and what is fleeting in this world. But dry intellectualism without scriptural or intuitive basis may finally lead to scepticism, and ruin a man's spiritual future. A man wise in his own conceit is bound to end in a personal tragedy.

Thus scriptures, experience, and reason form the threefold test of spiritual life; and this test is to be applied at all stages by all aspirants.

The really earnest and alert aspirant finds lessons in every object around him. Every moment of his life is a moment of choice between the true and the false. Every spiritual aspirant must be wide-awake and keep the fire of discrimination always bright in his heart. No event, no thought, should escape his notice. To such a person the whole universe is a great book of knowledge.

Dream and reality

What are dreams? A little boy told his mother about a dream he had had, and she asked him: 'Johnny, what are dreams?' The boy replied: 'Movie pictures you see when you are asleep.' Dreams are of several types: some are meaningless, some are reflections of our desires, while some have higher spiritual value. Some dreams refer to the past, even to our past lives. If we study some of our dreams, we find some of the people we meet or some of the events that happen in them do not belong to our present life. Some dreams refer to the future. One day in 1940, when I was in Sweden, I woke up with the consciousness that I should send away 2,000 francs from that country. This I did. A few days later a law was passed, as a wartime emergency measure, that only a small amount could be removed from that country. Abraham Lincoln had a vivid dream of his own death by assassination and told others about it.

Some of the dreams reveal our hidden desires and complexes. Many dreams are symbolic. They are to be interpreted. Freud and Jung, two of the greatest of modern psychologists, attached great importance to dreams, as giving clues to the patient's mental condition. However, their interpretations were not always true. Freud, especially, was obsessed with the idea that all dreams were expressions of repressed sexual desire. That is not at all true, but it is profitable to study one's own dream and gain some insight into the workings of one's own mind. If we examine our dreams we find a new side of our personality. We are not as good as we had thought ourselves to be. Some dreams reveal awful sides of our personality. But that is no cause to get frightened. Truth about yourself should make you stronger and more determined to overcome your defects.

Often dreams come from a deeper layer of consciousness. It is said that Robert Louis Stevenson had dreamt about 'Dr. Jekyl and Mr. Hyde' before he wrote that famous story. The great nineteenth-century German chemist Kekule discovered the structure of benzene in a dream. One night when he was dozing near the fireplace, he saw several structural formulae wriggling before his eyes. Suddenly he noticed that some of them were connected in a closed ring, like two snakes trying to swallow each other's tail. He woke up and spent the rest of the night working out the ring structure of benzene and the theory of resonance.

Some dreams speak of the soul's deep spiritual aspirations.

One night in a dream I wrote to my teacher, Swami Brahmananda, 'I am trying to see the Divine in all.' In the dream he wrote back: 'Try to see the whole in every part. Try to see the Infinite in every finite thing.' For days this was the theme of my meditation.

Then there are spiritual dreams in which great spiritual truths are revealed. One may receive a *mantra* in a dream or may get an ecstatic vision. A dream *mantra* often tallies with the *mantra* with which one is initiated by the *guru*. We find several such instances in the lives of the Holy Mother and the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. The vision of a divine Form in a dream can be very encouraging to an aspirant struggling hard in his spiritual life. However, though the joy of the experience may remain for a long time, unless it serves as an inducement to proper meditation and moral purification in the waking state, the aspirant gains nothing. An experience, unless it is a conscious one, has very little spiritual value.

One should pay more attention to that light by which the dreamer sees dreams. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, there is a remarkable discussion about this inner light. Once the great sage Yājñavalkya went to the court of King Janaka. The king put to him a series of questions about the light by which man works and sees things. Yājñavalkya gave suitable answers. First, he said, the sun acted as light for man; when the sun had set, the moon; when the moon had also set, the fire; and when fire was put out, the sound — these successively acted as lights for man. Finally, the king asked: 'After the sun and the moon have both set, fire has gone out, and sound is hushed, Yājñavalkya, what serves as light for a man?' The great sage replied: 'The Self indeed serves as his light.' [9] The other lights are external ones and can help a man only in his waking state. But during dream and deep sleep states it is the light of the Self by which man knows and enjoys himself. It is not illumined by anything but it illumines everything else. In the state of spiritual illumination this light shines alone, all by itself.

Modern man looks upon sleep only as a period of rest. In the West deep sleep never became the subject of philosophic enquiry or introspection. But in the Upaniṣads we find very profound thinking on the nature of the deep sleep state. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* says:

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[9] ibid., 4.3.2-6

> As a hawk or an eagle, after flying about in the sky, is exhausted, and stretching its wings glides towards its nest, so does the self hasten to the state where, falling asleep, it seeks no desire and sees no dream.[10]

The same Upaniṣad further states that in the state of deep sleep 'a father ceases to be a father, a mother ceases to be a mother, a murderer ceases to be a murderer, a recluse ceases to be a recluse.'[11] In that state one does not see, hear, taste, talk, or listen because for all these activities a second object is necessary. But in deep sleep the individual soul becomes one with the infinite supreme Spirit and experiences pure bliss. There is then one undivided consciousness like a vast expanse of water.[12] This condition is the nearest approximation to the state of liberation; but there is a vast difference between the two. The individual self no doubt enjoys unalloyed happiness during deep sleep but, nevertheless, it is in bondage and ignorance. When it comes out of sleep it becomes the old self again, and experiences all the old sorrows and limitations. We must get the experience of deep sleep consciously.

A Sunday school teacher in San Francisco was telling her class of small children that all men are children of God. One little boy asked: 'How about the bad men in Alcatraz Prison? Are they also children of God?' The teacher was puzzled and kept quiet for a short while. Then an intelligent little girl said: 'Yes, they too are children of God; only, those guys don't know it.' In deep sleep we become one with God but we have no idea of it when we wake up. Forgetting our true divine nature we behave in every stupid way possible. This world is like a prison-house; we are here because we have forgotten our true nature. Something of that state of deep sleep must be brought into our meditation consciously. Spiritual experience produces in us perfect relaxation, peace and happiness of deep sleep plus supreme knowledge and purity and fulfilment.

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[10] ibid., 4.3.19 [11] ibid., 4.3.22 [12] ibid., 4.3.32

Once Swami Premananda, one of the greatest of the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, was meditating in the shrine at the Belur Monastery. Soon he got absorbed in *samādhi.* A novice tried to rouse him without success. After a long time when the Swami came back to normal consciousness, the inexperienced young man asked him: 'Sir, were you asleep?' The great Swami in reply sang a Bengali song, '. . . I have put my sleep to sleep.'[13] He had gone beyond waking, dream and deep sleep into the superconscious state. Swami Turiyananda spoke about how he conquered sleep. He wanted to 'observe' sleep. Having hushed all his thoughts, when he was about to fall asleep, he kept awake by his will power. Practising thus, he found that sleep had dwindled and there was only a very thin partition separating him from Brahman.[14] He had reached the threshold of superconsciousness.

The mystery of psychic phenomena

There are several planes of consciousness. The sense plane in which we see and know physical objects is one plane. When we think or daydream, we live in the plane of mind for the time being. But we ordinarily know only a fraction of this plane. We know only very little about our own mind, and practically nothing about the vast cosmic mind (called *mahat*, meaning 'the vast') of which our individual minds are parts. What powers lie hidden in it, what strange things happen there, we have ordinarily very little knowledge. Just as we can manipulate the powers of the physical world, so can we manipulate Prāṇa, the psychic power. For some this capacity comes naturally. In Warsaw I met a lady who could see into the hidden nature of things. She could detect the defect in a machine which would not work. Swami Vivekananda spoke about a man in Hyderabad who could produce fresh roses, grapes, and many other things from nowhere.[15]

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[13] See Swami Gambhirananda, *The Apostles of Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), pp. 139-140.

[14] See Swami Ritajananda, *Swami Turiyananda* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1973), p. 4.

[15] See *The Complete Works,* op. cit., Vol.II, 1971, pp. 11-12.

Everyone has mental powers. Prāṇa works in all people. Only, in the vast majority of people it is all directed outwardly for the gratification of sense pleasures and worldly success. If we control this waste, we find psychic power accumulating within us. Then we should know how to guide it into spiritual channels. That is where we need the guidance of spiritual souls. Otherwise our accumulated psychic power flows into other channels and we get some cheap occult powers. We may see things happening afar (clairvoyance) or hear distant sounds, or we may be able to read the thoughts of others. These things may amuse us for a time, but they have actually no higher value; they are only obstacles in our paths to Reality. Psychic powers do not give us fulfilment and bliss and freedom from sorrows. They only make us more egotistic.

Illumined souls pay scant attention to these powers. If they get them, they use them with great care for the good of others. Swami Brahmananda was a reservoir of spiritual power which he carefully used for the welfare of others. He was endowed with a deep psychic insight. One day he warned a young man: 'Be careful. There is a thick cloud around you which will manifest when you are about forty years old.' The boy later on became mad and died around the time the Swami had warned him about.

Swami Brahmananda could see the past and the future of his disciples. I first met him when I was a young college student. I went with a friend of mine to see him at Balaram Babu's house. He asked my friend to show him his palm. After looking at it he said: 'Lust will be of some hindrance to you, but if Sri Ramakrishna wills, it will disappear.' But Swami Brahmananda did not look at my palm even though Swami Premananda requested him to do so. I felt dejected, but later on when I learnt that Swami Brahmananda had told his attendant that I would become a monk, I felt very happy and blessed. His prediction came to be true. I became a monk and my friend became a householder, but he remained a great devotee of God.

In 1917 when I was in Bangalore, I fell ill with enteric fever. I was admitted to a hospital. One morning an old man was brought in and placed in a bed next to mine. In the evening he died. There was no fear of death in me but I found my severe bodily pain difficult to bear. I then thought that it was better to die. As soon as such a thought became strong in me, I had a vision of Swami Brahmananda. He said, 'How can you die? You have yet to do Sri Ramakrishna's work.' Saying so, he disappeared. That experience changed my whole being. I was filled with great peace and a deep spirit of surrender. My illness also changed for the better. A number of Brahmananda's disciples had similar experiences. He had great powers, but he used them with discrimination, and only for the welfare of others.

Psychic powers are of various types. In the life of Sri Ramakrishna we come across two young men, Chandra and Girija, whom his teacher, Bhairavi Brahmani, had introduced to him. Chandra carried with him a miraculous ball with the help of which he had attained the power to disappear suddenly from human eyes. But he had not attained high mental purity, and so began to misuse this power to get ingress into other people's houses unseen. He was soon overpowered by lust, and as a result lost his power. The other young man, Girija, had another power. One night he demonstrated it to Sri Ramakrishna. It was pitch dark and the Master was finding it difficult to find his way to Dakshineswar temple from Sambhu Mallick's garden-house. Girija, who was accompanying the Master then stopped and turned about, and there emanated from his back a bright beam of light which illumined the road right up to the gate of the Kālī temple. Sri Ramakrishna, the super *yogī* that he was, never displayed such cheap psychic powers. In this particular case he withdrew the psychic powers of Chandra and Girija into his own person and thereby made them turn their mind towards God-realization.[16]

All great spiritual men have deprecated paying attention to psychic powers, as these distract the aspirant from the main spiritual path and may ultimately lead to total ruin. Psychic experiences are common to all sincere aspirants who practise systematic *sādhanā*. One may then hear the ringing of bells or may hear the great uncreated sound, the *anāhata dhvani,* eternally vibrating in the universe. Or one may see the mysterious inner Light. All these are indications that you are on the right track. That is the only utility they possess. We should not mistake the signpost for the road. Swami Vivekananda as a young man used to have wonderful spiritual experiences. Once the power of clairvoyance came to him. Being of a rational bent of mind he verified his experiences and found them to be true. However, when he told Sri Ramakrishna about it, the Master advised him to discontinue his meditation for a few days so that the power may leave him.

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[16] See *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, op. cit., pp. 467-469.

Many people are interested in ghosts and disembodied spirits. A true spiritual aspirant has no use for them and keeps himself aloof from such weird phenomena. But, human nature has an incurable curiosity and many people waste their precious time in 'spiritualism' or 'spiritism' rather than turning to true spiritual life. You may have read Swami Abhedananda's book *Life beyond Death.* In it he describes his attending several seances. In India if a man is possessed by a ghost he is immediately taken to a temple or an exorcist and freed from that nuisance. But in America he becomes a 'medium', and makes money out of it. Mediumistic phenomena may be true but it is sheer waste of time to play with such things. Sri Ramakrishna had a disciple by name Niranjan. Before he went to the Master, he had been acting as a medium for a group of 'spiritualists'. When the Master heard about it, he asked the boy to stop the practice immediately. 'My boy,' he told him, 'if you think of ghosts and spooks, ghosts and spooks you will become and if you think of God, divine will be your life.' [17]

In the life of Sri Ramakrishna we find that he had encountered spirits of all kinds. His teacher Totapuri, too, had an encounter with a spirit at Dakshineswar. There was a Bhairava (a demi-god who is a follower of Śiva) at the Dakshineswar Kālī temple. He was invisible to others. One day when

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[17] *The Apostles of Ramakrishna,* op. cit., p. 162

Totapuri was meditating under the Panchavati, he saw a tall and dusky figure coming down from the branches of the tree. Totapuri was not at all perturbed. He told his mysterious visitor: 'Very well, you and I are the same being; you are one manifestation of Brahman and I am another. Come, sit down and meditate.' The Bhairava burst out laughing and disappeared.[18]

Instead of wasting our time with 'spirits', we should go to the supreme Spirit, the Soul of all souls, the ultimate source of peace and bliss. We must learn to bypass or transcend the psychic planes and rise to the plane of the true Spirit, where the individual soul comes in touch with the Oversoul. As long as this union is not achieved, so long does the hunger of the soul persist, and as long as this persists, you can never get true peace or fulfilment. The touch of the cosmic Spirit must come to the soul; the true inner Light must illumine the dark chambers of the heart. Then alone can man transcend the sorrows of life. True spiritual experience comes directly from the supreme Spirit. It is beyond the reach of ordinary mind and reason. As the great Sufi mystic, Al-Ghazālī, said:

> During the solitary state, things were revealed to me which it is impossible either to describe or point out. The sight is illumined by a light which uncovers hidden things and objects which the intellect fails to reach. The transport which one attains by the method of the Sufis is like an immediate perception, as if one touched the object with one's hand.

The great Neoplatonic mystic Plotinus said:

> You ask, how can we know the Infinite? I answer: not by reason. It is the office of reason to distinguish and define. The Infinite cannot be ranked as its objects. You can only apprehend the Infinite by a faculty superior to reason, by entering into a state in which you are your finite self no longer, in which the divine essence is communicated to you.

What a true spiritual experience does for you

A true spiritual experience is judged by its fruits. Visions and other spiritual experiences must bring about a total transformation of character and make the spiritual seeker stronger, purer and more magnanimous towards others. They must fill him with a new hope which must be reflected in his actions. As St. John of the Cross, the great Carmelite mystic of the seventeenth century, said about true spiritual experiences:

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[18] *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master,* op. cit., p. 478

> They enrich the soul marvellously. . . . A single one of them may be sufficient to abolish at a stroke certain imperfections of which the soul. . . had vainly tried to rid itself and to leave it adorned with virtues and loaded with supernatural gifts.

A lady with a strong imagination once told me in the West that she had a vision of Sri Ramakrishna. Another young man, who had fallen in love with a girl, saw 'visions' of that girl during his meditations and mistook them for manifestations of the Divine Mother! I had to tell the plain truth in these cases — that they were all victims of their own too vivid imaginations. There are visions and visions. Some are products of vivid imaginations and are purely subjective. Others are objective manifestations of subtle realities which are perceived by the receptive mind. Their merits are to be judged by their results. Hallucinations imply perceptions which have no reality behind them, but are products of diseased nerves or disordered minds. Psychic experiences, though genuine, belong to an ever-changing subtle world and have no spiritual value. On the contrary, a true spiritual experience brings us directly in touch with the unchanging Reality, and has a transforming effect on our lives. It transforms our character, our consciousness and our outlook on the world. Swami Vivekananda once made a blunt but very significant remark: 'Those who say that they have seen Sri Ramakrishna but have not imbibed something of his purity, renunciation and devotion, might as well have seen a monkey.'

The spiritual aspirant should not become impatient about getting spiritual experiences. They will come at the right time when the soul is ready. Till then it is better for him to bring about a change in his life. It is far better to build up a pure, calm and peaceful character than ruin one's life by vainly imagining that one is having wonderful spiritual experiences. When I was in the West I came across fine men and women eager to profit by a systematic course of spiritual discipline. A Swiss lady had wonderful vibrations, purity and calmness, but she was dreamy. Her energy formed a whirlpool. She was taken to a psychiatrist but he could do nothing. She wrote to me about her inner experiences. I gave her some spiritual instructions which worked wonders. At the Hague I met a young Dutch who had had a strange experience of quiet but had lost it. He was eager to regain that calmness through systematic spiritual discipline. I asked him and his wife to do meditation in the proper way. They got considerable benefit from it.

A highly cultured lady, the wife of a university professor in Switzerland, happened to read the book *The Spiritual Teachings of Swami Brahmananda*. She visited me and asked some questions. I found her spiritually inclined to a great degree but she was unable to face the problems of life. I advised her to achieve a balance between the inner and outer life and be true to 'the kindred points of heaven and earth'. I advised her to combine worship and work and to fill her soul with the music of the divine Name. She struggled sincerely and underwent a remarkable transformation.

A Protestant minister came to me after reading *The Life of Ramakrishna* by Romain Rolland. He wanted practical instructions about spiritual life and was very sincere about it. I had several talks with him. I advised him to first of all find out where he actually stood and then follow the simple instructions I had given. He cooperated and soon attained a new inner harmony. His friends said that his sermons improved. Some people say that one cannot practise Yoga in the West. After several years of experience I can say with confidence that this is not at all true. In the West I had the good fortune to meet more than one young man whose mind had been raised to a higher plane. When you come to the right person you cannot but feel convinced. I saw several young people who attained joy and peace through spiritual practice. The effects of steady spiritual practice are sure to be felt by anyone whether he is in the East or in the West. God sees only man's inner aspiration and not his outer dress or habits.

Varieties of spiritual experience

There are no limits to spiritual experience; there is an infinite variety of it. Some of these are lower; they are more of the nature of signposts or indicators than true spiritual experiences. When the mind is properly attuned, you may hear supersensuous vibrations. You don't hear them with your physical ear. They are heard within your mind. Sometimes you may hear the melody of bells ringing at a distance. They are easily heard in lonely places especially at the dead of night. I used to hear them when I was at Māyāvatī.* Even here, in Wiesbaden, I hear it. Sometimes you can feel certain vibrations rising out of the depths of the *ākāśa* (space) within you, just like ripples produced in a pond when a stone is thrown in. If you are in a certain state of concentration, you can hear the *anāhata dhvani*, the eternal, uncreated sound vibration of the cosmic Mind.

Then there is the experience of the mystic light. This inner light is the light of consciousness. Some of these experiences are good in that they indicate that you are getting more concentration. But you should not pay much attention to them. If you do, you are caught. You forget your goal and get attached to side attractions. As I have repeatedly stated, mere concentration is not of much use. Concentration in itself may not have a spiritual content. Our goal must be spiritual. If we hear a mystic sound, we should go to the source of that sound; if we see a light, we must go to the source of that light. The supreme Spirit is the source of all these phenomena, and that is our goal. A sincere aspirant should brush aside such lower experiences when they come; he should not talk about them to others thereby making them also confused. When you do

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* A hill station in the Himalayas. The editorial office of *Prabuddha Bhārata*, a monthly organ of the Ramakrishna Order, is located there. Swami Yatiswarananda was there as the editor of the journal in 1922, and again during 1926-27. — *Editor.*

japa and meditation, think only of the *Iṣṭa Devatā* who is the embodiment of consciousness and bliss. Do not think about psychic experiences.

Most of the aspirants cannot meditate without a holy Personality to centre their feelings upon. Let them begin with His form and make it vivid and conscious. The Form rouses in us divine attributes and, as our concentration deepens, we come in touch with the *Iṣṭa Devatā's* consciousness. In the holy Personality we see the link between the individual and the universal consciousness. Then we realize the same link in ourselves. Later on, our consciousness expands, and we then regard the individual as a manifestation of the Universal. Finally, both the Universal and the individual get merged into the Transcendental which is spoken of as the One-without-a-second.

Later on, advancing further, the Impersonal which manifests Itself as the Personal, becomes the centre of our experience. We feel our own soul and that of all others as manifestations of one undivided Consciousness. We see the supreme Spirit in all beings and feel a deep inner urge to serve all beings. We are filled with deep love and compassion for all without creating moral confusion in us.

First we come in touch with the cosmic vibrations, next we come in touch with the cosmic mind, and then we feel the contact between our finite consciousness and the infinite consciousness. From one point of view, all these are concentric circles, one inside another. We can live on the plane of thoughts, we can reduce our body and that of others to mere thoughts, we can then silence these thought forms, and reach the plane of the Impersonal and enjoy supreme peace and blessedness.

There must be three types of verification of a spiritual experience: 1. Verification of my own experience by repeating it again and again. 2. Verification of my own experience by comparing it with what I heard from my teacher. 3. Verification of my own experience by comparing it with what is said in the true scriptures. If we do not make these verifications, there is great scope for self-delusion and our experiences may even become dangerous fancies of an uncontrolled mind.

When we have body consciousness, we must be in tune with the physical world; when we are at the mental plane, we must be in tune with the cosmic mind; and when we rise to the spiritual plane, we should be in tune with the supreme Spirit. The light and joy and harmony that we feel at the higher plane must be brought out and made to manifest in the lower planes. Then we become channels of divine power, wisdom and bliss for the good of the world.

CHAPTER 31

SPIRITUAL UNFOLDMENT

Body, mind and Spirit

In order to understand the mystery of spiritual unfoldment, it is necessary that we be acquainted with our true nature and the states of consciousness we pass through in life.

Our true nature is divine, that is, Brahman is our true Self. This true Self is called the Ātman but in reality it is non-different from Brahman, the infinite Spirit — such is the experience of the spiritually illumined souls. Ignorance covers this true nature. Through ignorance we feel that we are separate from God and that we are only finite, mortal beings. Ignorance is like a strong drink. It makes one forget oneself and creates fantasies. First it hides our true nature and then makes us identify ourselves with what we are not. Through ignorance the true Self becomes identified with the body, the senses, the mind, and there is created a fantasy of the ego. As a result, we feel we have two kinds of body — the physical or gross and the mental or subtle. Through introspection we can find that we have a still subtler body called the causal body. Beyond all these three is the Ātman, our true Self.

Further, we are caught in three states of consciousness: the waking state in which consciousness is identified with physical body, and we are conscious of the physical world; the dream state in which consciousness is identified with the subtle body, and we live in a dream world created by our own mental impressions; the deep sleep state in which consciousness is identified with our causal body which is in tune with a causal world, and the mind ceases to function.

Men of knowledge tell us that beyond these three states there is the state of transcendental consciousness, also called *turīya* in which one regains one's pure spiritual nature. The attainment of this highest state of pure consciousness, when the soul realizes that it is nothing but the infinite Spirit, does not, however, take place all of a sudden. In the case of the vast majority of spiritual aspirants this is a gradual process. The attainment of spiritual consciousness takes the form of a gradual unfoldment. There are various stages through which the aspirant passes before he attains the fullest illumination. It is this spiritual unfoldment that we are going to discuss now.

In our conscious state we are identified with the physical body. We then think we are short or tall, young or old, fair or dark. When we identify ourselves with the mind, we experience pain or pleasure, misery or happiness. When identified with the ego, we think, 'I am the doer; I am bound or free.'

We must get rid of our ignorance and realize our true spiritual nature. We cannot do this by simply wishing. If wishes were horses, everybody would ride. We have hypnotized ourselves and must get ourselves dehypnotized. How to do this? We must reconstruct our old self.

We must break all old bad habits of thinking, feeling and acting, form good moral habits, and guide our thoughts, emotions and actions by the spiritual ideal. Then we become purer.

As the mind becomes pure as a result of moral disciplines, prayer, repetition of the divine Name and meditation, we develop the power of introspection. We then discover within ourselves various centres of consciousness, the 'secret stairs' of the mystics, a secret elevator with various landing stages connected with different planes of consciousness. In the Tantras, each of these centres is called a *cakra*. We all know how our thoughts, feelings and activities change with the change of our moods. These moods have something to do with the centres of consciousness with which we may be connected at particular times.

Schopenhauer says that sex becomes the focus of the will as the child grows into the youth. One then lives in a new world of thoughts, emotions and actions — all dominated by sex. We feel the stomach when we are very hungry. We feel the heart when we are swayed by deep emotions. We feel the point between the eyebrows when our thoughts are clear and luminous. This means two things: one, we have various centres of consciousness in us; secondly, we are constantly moving from one centre to another. Here we have referred only to physical centres. Apart from these centres connected with our physical existence, there are higher centres of spiritual awareness. They are not visible to the eye nor can they be understood by the ordinary mind. They are subtle spiritual centres which can be known only by advanced Yogīs. According to the Tantras, there are seven such centres of consciousness called the *cakras.*

It is necessary for us to get a clear conception of the various centres of consciousness and their functions. In describing supersensuous things, sometimes we are forced to use the language of the physical. This is what is done in describing the *kuṇḍalinī* (literally, 'the coiled-up'), sometimes called the serpent power, the spiritual power latent in man. It is likened to a coiled-up snake lying asleep at the base of the spine.

The Suṣumnā, the Iḍā and the Piṅgalā

Kuṇḍalinī, or the coiled-up power, is consciousness in its creative aspect as power. In Yogic language it lies asleep, coiled up, in the region corresponding to the base of the spine. In the spiritually awakened, the power flows through the spiritual channel called *suṣumnā*. This spiritual channel exists side by side with two other channels called *iḍā* and *piṅgalā.* These are said to exist to the left and the right of the spinal column, while the *suṣumnā* is in the centre. Picture three channels having their junction at the basic or the lowest centre. The central one is the spiritual channel, while the other two are connected with man's ordinary physical and psychical life. In an average man the energy that gathers at the junction of the channels flows only through the two side ones but not through the central channel. So all energy is side-tracked and expresses itself in ordinary worldly thoughts, feelings and activities.

Each centre is a point of contact between the individual and the cosmic on a particular plane of consciousness. The first three centres, from the bottom up, are connected with the animal life of man like eating, drinking, sense enjoyment and sex pleasures. Man's first spiritual awakening comes when his consciousness rises to the centre in the heart. It is there that he discovers his soul.

The centres of consciousness are sometimes described in terms of physical plexuses and ganglia with which they are connected. But they must not be identified with them. As Sir John Woodroffe remarks in his famous book *The Serpent Power,* these 'lotuses' or centres of consciousness are extremely subtle centres which vitalize and control the gross bodily tracts indicated by the various regions of the vertebral column and the ganglia, plexuses, nerves, arteries, and the organs situated in those respective regions.

Cakras or centres of consciousness

If we concentrate on the subtle body which permeates the physical body, we shall have a clearer conception of our mental and emotional nature, and can learn to control not only our emotional nature, but also our senses and physical organs. Our teachers tell us that just as our physical body has hidden parts and processes which we do not see, of whose functions we may not be aware, so there are unconscious and superconscious layers of our mind. Many of our deep-rooted desires and passions lie in the unconscious. Those must be discovered and uprooted if progress in spiritual life is to be achieved. The superconscious is the plane of spiritual experience and bliss.

The causal, subtle and gross bodies have several points of contact. These points are the *cakras* already referred to, lying along the region of the spine between the head and the base of the spine. The spirit, the mind and the body meet at these junctions and influence one another. Information constantly passes between all these three bodies through these *cakras*. But in ordinary people only the lower three *cakras* are active; the higher ones lie dormant. These higher centres can be roused by certain Yogic disciplines, and each centre when activated reveals a particular state of consciousness. It is owing to this connection between the body and the mind that the two act and react on each other. We know that thoughts and emotions not only affect the body, but also can transform it.

Selfish animal thoughts and emotions influence the lower centres of consciousness connected with the animal life of man. Higher thoughts and emotions react on higher centres. There are three separate states of being in every one of us — *tamas, rajas* and *sattva*, as already mentioned. *Tamas* is a state of laziness and sense gratification without struggling for higher life. The state of *rajas* is the life of struggle between lower and higher natures. *Tamas* and *rajas* are associated with the lower *cakras* or centres. The higher centres are associated with *sattva*. In *sattva,* the higher nature or consciousness has gained ascendancy, but the evil has not yet been transmuted. Seeds of evil growth lie in the unconscious; they cannot be dug out and thrown away. But they can be burnt with the light of spiritual experience.

Suṣumnā becomes active only when we are in the state of *sattva*. The psychic forces working in the personality must become harmonious. When the mind is overactive or restless, we can be sure that a good deal of our psychic energy is getting side-tracked. When we allow ourselves to be overactive, restless, angry, melancholic or too jovial and careless, we lose so much of our psychic energy. Raising the *kuṇḍalinī* is not easy as people think. It needs tremendous will power and discipline. In the beginning it is difficult to force the psychic energy along the *suṣumnā* by the exercise of will power alone.

So, to begin with, we are asked to concentrate the mind on an image of the Lord in the heart centre. Through devotion to the Lord we try to concentrate the mind at the heart. All forms of dissipation of energy are checked, and the heart becomes the centre of our consciousness. When we do all this, through the grace of the Lord, the *kuṇḍalinī* awakens. At first we begin with imaginations about the lotus, the light, the form of the Deity, etc. But when our spiritual consciousness awakens, we realize the truth behind these imaginations. We then find that we had been imagining till then about things which really exist.

As long as the seeds of desire, the latent impressions of past experiences, remain in the mind, spiritual experience can never be continuous. At first we can get only certain glimpses. But every little ray of light burns up some of the latent impressions. The highest degree of spiritual consciousness called *nirvikalpa samādhi*, can be attained only when most of the seeds of desire have been thus destroyed. Partial experiences, temporary spiritual visions, occasional ecstasies, however good they are in themselves, cannot confer on us the highest beatitude. As long as we move in the lower planes, we are never safe.

Spiritual experience alone can make God and soul realities for us. To seek the Reality behind the phenomenon is the goal of religion. We usually depend on so many external objects and do not depend solely on God who is the only Reality. The unreal things have become real for us, and we have made the real Thing unreal. The power to know the Reality lies dormant in us. We have to awaken this power. At every *cakra* we get a new experience, we realize a new aspect of Reality. When the heart centre awakens one realizes oneself as the soul, the Jīvātman, a luminous point of consciousness, separate from body and thoughts. When *kuṇḍalinī* reaches the centre between the eyebrows, the aspirant realizes that the Jīvātman is a part of the Paramātman, the soul is a part of the Oversoul. Most people cannot go beyond this stage.

Don't play with the serpent

Now here is a point for all spiritual seekers to note. Those who practise spiritual disciplines without physical and mental purity are not only wasting their energy from the spiritual point of view, but are also running the risk of gathering too much energy, which, flowing through the worldly channels, might intensify their worldly life, including sex life, and thus harm them greatly. Remember Sri Ramakrishna's parable of the farmer who worked hard to irrigate his field and water his crops but later found that all the water was being lost through rat holes.[1] So worldly desires are the holes through which the energy flows out into worldly channels in the case of a worldly man.

When I was in Switzerland I once visited a well-known psychologist. He had a number of students to whom he taught Yoga. I saw his wife painting a picture of the 'serpent power', and I asked him: 'Is it not dangerous to play with the serpent?' He laughed and said: 'Oh, no, Swami. People don't take it seriously.' But sometimes some take it seriously, and try to awaken the *kuṇḍalinī* without undergoing the purification of mind. The practice of concentration without sufficient purity is dangerous. If the energy that is increased through concentration cannot move along the spiritual channel, it may express itself outwardly in the form of violent passions in an extrovert, harming him as well as others. In the introvert the gathered-up energy may not find an outward expression. In that case it may form an awful whirlpool in the individual, shattering his nerves and mind and making him a complete wreck.

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[1] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 578

In some cases, as the mind is stirred through meditation, all the good and evil things lying hidden in it may come to the surface with tremendous force and bring about a physical and mental collapse. Those impure souls who want to play with the 'serpent' always come to grief. In some others again, the stored-up energy may manifest itself as cheap psychic powers such as clairvoyance, thought-reading, and such powers which make those persons egotistic and spiritually bankrupt. In some cases again, there may be a partial awakening of the latent power. The spiritual power may rise to a higher centre but may fall down with disastrous results, stimulating worldly desires. But for a sincere soul following the moral disciplines along with the practice of prayer, *japa* and meditation there is absolutely nothing to be afraid of. For him spiritual life is very safe.

Spiritual unfoldment is seldom uniform

One of the difficult problems that every aspirant has to face is that spiritual progress is seldom uniform. Spiritual unfoldment does not take place in a straight line. After reaching a higher centre, the aspirant may find the way closed. He gets stuck at that centre and his energies get side-tracked. It may take a long time before he finds his way out again. Sometimes the aspirant finds himself going round and round without making any progress. These intervals or 'dry' periods, described as 'dark nights of the soul' by the great Christian mystic, St. John of the Cross, are usually unavoidable in every aspirant's life. But their intensity and duration can be reduced if the aspirant follows the moral path with steadiness. Purity of mind, strict regularity, and devotion ensure smooth spiritual progress.

The description of the rise of the *kuṇḍalinī* appears to be simple and easy enough. But actually it is all very, very difficult. Out of a thousand people who struggle for it, only one may get the awakening, as the *Gītā* says.[2] But there is no need to get discouraged. From the way most people live we find that it is only good that in their case the *kuṇḍalinī* awakens very slowly or does not awaken at all. Most people are not at all ready for the rise. They cannot face the tremendous reactions that it produces. In fact, in the beginning of one's spiritual life, it is better to forget all about *kuṇḍalinī* and think only about God. Let the love for your *Iṣṭa Devatā* absorb all your attention and energies. Leave the *kuṇḍalinī* to Him. He will look after your spiritual welfare. God will grant you awakening at the right time.

As I have repeatedly said, it is better to follow the path of synthesis — a combination of *karma, jñāna* and *bhakti*. Let selfless work go hand in hand with your meditation. That purifies and strengthens the mind. Practise self-analysis and make the mind detached and calm. And then *japa* does the rest. When properly done, *japa* creates an inner harmony which gradually flows along the *suṣumnā* making it active.

The best means of awakening of Kuṇḍalinī

Whatever be our spiritual path, be it Hindu's, Buddhist's, Christian's or Sufi's, the three stages we all have to pass through are purification, meditation and experience of the divine Reality or Godhead. Here arises the question: how are we to begin meditation with a view to awakening our spiritual consciousness? One of us asked our spiritual teacher, Swami Brahmananda, 'Sir, how can the *kuṇḍalinī*, the latent spiritual consciousness, be awakened?' This is what the Swami replied:

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[2] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 7.3

> According to some there are special exercises by which the *kuṇḍalinī* can be awakened, but I believe it can best be awakened by the practice of *japa* and meditation. The practice of *japa* is specially suited to this present age, and there is no spiritual practice easier than this, but meditation must accompany the repetition of the *mantra.*[3]

There are various ways of looking upon God — as father or mother, as effulgent light, and so on. Making the heart the centre of your consciousness, think of the divine Spirit there in any form you like. Repeat the divine Name or a holy text, dwelling on the divine aspect it represents. This is a simple meditation, but later on it leads to real meditation, which helps in bringing about the union between the individual soul and the supreme Spirit.

The holy word and holy thought have great power. As one repeats the divine Name and meditates on the divine Spirit, one should feel that the holy vibrations and thoughts are making one's body, senses, mind, and ego purer and purer. When this is done with intensity, the breath becomes rhythmic, the vital energy becomes harmonious, the mind becomes pure and calm, the ego tends to become cosmo-centric. This leads to spiritual unfoldment stage by stage. The repetition of the divine Name accompanied by meditation produces a divine music which clears the spiritual channel, awakens the sleeping serpent power, and enables it to move along to the vitalized higher centres.

The ascent of Kuṇḍalinī

As consciousness rises higher and higher, it moves along both the horizontal and vertical lines. The soul and the Oversoul are drawn closer together. This is symbolized in the Upaniṣads by the analogy of two birds of beautiful plumage who reside in the top and bottom branches of the same tree.[4] The lower bird looks up and at last realizes that they are one. To use Yogic phraseology, the lower bird is the individual soul sitting at the base of the spine. The upper bird is the supreme Spirit sitting in the thousand-petalled lotus in the brain. Individual consciousness flowing along the spiritual channel of *suṣumnā* reaches the topmost point and realizes its union with the supreme Spirit. This is the ascent of the soul to the highest spiritual point and experience. Most souls do not return from this state to the domain of phenomena again. But, as Sri Ramakrishna says, some sages are pleased to come down from that spiritual height for the good of mankind.[5]

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[3] Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion,* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1971), p. 275

[4] *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad,* 3.1.1-3; *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad,* 4.6-7

Regarding the experiences connected with each centre or *cakra* let us see what Sri Ramakrishna, the greatest modern authority on the subject, has to say from his own personal experience:

> After great effort and spiritual practice the *kuṇḍalinī* is awakened. According to the Yogīs there are three nerves in the spinal column: *iḍā, piṅgalā,* and *suṣumnā*. Along the *suṣumnā* are six lotuses or centres, the lowest being known as the *mūlādhāra*. Then come successively *svādhiṣṭhāna, maṇipūra, anāhata, viśuddha* and *ājñā*. These are the six centres. The *kuṇḍalinī*, when awakened, passes through the lower centres and comes to the *anāhata*, which is at the heart. It stays there. At that time the mind of the aspirant is withdrawn from the three lower centres. He feels the awakening of divine Consciousness and sees Light. In mute wonder he sees that radiance and cries out: 'What is this? What is this?'
>
> After passing through the six centres, the *kuṇḍalinī* reaches the thousand-petalled lotus known as the *sahasrāra* and the aspirant goes into *samādhi*.
>
> According to the Vedas these centres are called *bhūmi* or 'planes'. There are seven such planes. The centre at the heart corresponds to the fourth plane of the Vedas. According to the Tantra there is in this centre a lotus called *anāhata*, with twelve petals.
>
> The centre known as *viśuddha* is the fifth plane. This centre is at the throat and has a lotus with sixteen petals. When the *kuṇḍalinī* reaches this plane, the devotee longs to talk and hear

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[5] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., pp. 82, 216, 301

> only about God. Conversation on worldly subjects, on 'woman and gold', causes him great pain. He leaves the place where people talk of these matters.
>
> Then comes the sixth plane, corresponding to the centre known as *ājñā*. This centre is located between the eyebrows and it has a lotus with two petals. When the *kuṇḍalinī* reaches it, the aspirant sees the form of God. But still there remains a slight barrier between the devotee and God. It is like a light inside a lantern. You may think you have touched the light, but in reality you cannot, because of the barrier of glass.
>
> And last of all is the seventh plane, which, according to Tantra, is the centre of the thousand-petalled lotus. When the *kuṇḍalinī* arrives there, the aspirant goes into *samādhi*. In that lotus dwells Saccidānanda Śiva, the Absolute. There *kuṇḍalinī*, the awakened power, unites with Śiva. This is known as the union of Śiva and Śakti. When the *kuṇḍalinī* rises to the *sahasrāra* and the mind goes into *samādhi*, the aspirant loses all consciousness of the outer world. He can no longer retain his physical body. If milk is poured into his mouth, it runs out again. In that state the life-breath lingers for twenty-one days and then passes out. Entering the 'black waters' of the ocean, the ship never comes back. But the *Īśvarakoṭīs*, such as the Incarnations of God, can come down from this state of *samādhi*. They can descend from this exalted state because they like to live in the company of devotees and enjoy the love of God. God retains in them the 'Ego of knowledge' or the 'Ego of devotion', so that they may teach men. Their minds move between the sixth and seventh planes. They run a boat-race back and forth, as it were, between these two planes.[6]

These fully illumined souls see the one Spirit shining in all beings and are full of love and compassion for all people.

It is they who bring us the message of the superconscious. Their whole life is spent in guiding people along the spiritual path. Utterly free from all impurities and selfishness, ever immersed in the consciousness of the supreme Spirit, these great men live for the good of the world setting unique examples. They are witnesses to the spiritual destiny of man, the divinization of the human soul. Let us follow in their footsteps.

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[6] ibid., pp. 456-457.

(Given on p. 542 is a chart which represents the various stages of spiritual unfoldment.)

Spiritual Unfoldment Chart

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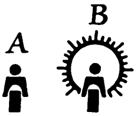

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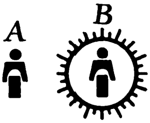

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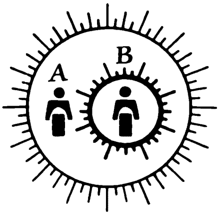

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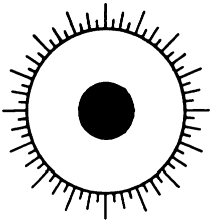
NON-ANTHROPOMORPHIC



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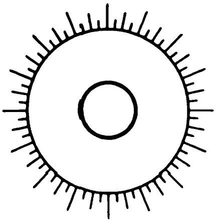

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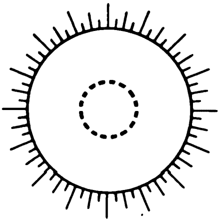

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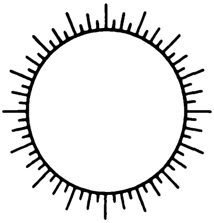

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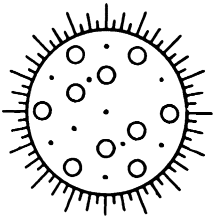

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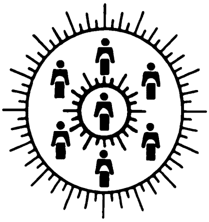

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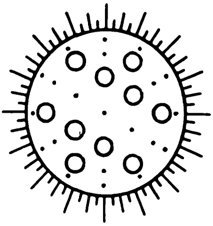

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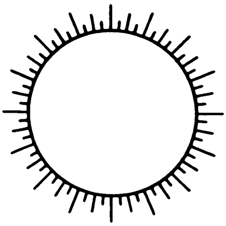

XI

I. *An ordinary man A is drawn towards a holy Personality* **B** *and accords worship to Him.*

II. *A sees more and more divine Glory in* **B**.

III. *A realizes that* **B** *is a glorious manifestation, while A himself is a poor manifestation, but a manifestation anyway, of the same infinite Reality* **O**.

IV. *A realizes that he is a soul — like a point of pure Consciousness while the reality is like a circle of pure Consciousness. But the point seems to be more real than the circle.*

V. *A finds both the point and the circle to be equally real.*

VI. *A finds the circle to be more real than the point.*

VII. *The point consciousness is lost in the circle consciousness, the infinite Reality.*

VIII. *The circle which is the highest Reality is seen to manifest itself as many souls endowed with greater or lesser divine Glory.*

IX. *The highest Reality which manifests Itself first as souls, further manifests Itself as humans; as a matter of fact, as all beings. The Godman, the holy Personality* **B** *with whose worship* **A** *began his spiritual life, appears again in a new setting. There are, of course, different Godmen or holy Personalities, but the devotee is concerned particularly with his own* **Iṣṭam** *or Chosen Ideal.*

X. *The One Spirit manifesting Itself as many souls.*

XI. *The One-without-a-second, the Absolute.*

The fully illumined man may remain in any state of spiritual consciousness, in IX, X or XI. There are other states of spiritual consciousness also in which he may remain as he pleases.

There are no limits to spiritual experience.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The diagrams and their descriptions given in the preceding pages were originally prepared by Swami Yatiswarananda himself during the early part of his stay in Europe, perhaps in 1934. In them the Swami has attempted to represent schematically the types of spiritual experience an aspirant gets when he passes through the various stages of spiritual progress — from a simple devotion to a Deity to the climactic non-dual experience, and thence to the all-embracing integral vision of the Reality in all Its aspects. The entire progression may be conceived in terms of a bellshaped curve: first there is the ascent from the lower to the higher planes of consciousness, and then after reaching the highest plane there is the descent into lower planes to experience a different and vaster dimension of Reality. This 'going up' and 'coming down' were termed Jñāna *and* Vijñāna, *respectively, by Sri Ramakrishna. Indeed, the chart is a diagrammatic representation of the basic philosophic ideas of Sri Ramakrishna.*

Cyclostyled copies of the chart were distributed by Swami Yatiswarananda among his disciples in India and in the West. However, many people have found it difficult to understand the chart without personal guidance, and have expressed their wish to have detailed explanatory comments on it. To fulfil this need we are giving below in three sections a brief exposition of the chart.

Early stages in spiritual progress

In Vedānta there are two main highways to spiritual experience: the path of knowledge (*jñānamārga*) and the path of devotion (*bhaktimārga*). Other paths like *karma* and Yoga are usually taken to be adjuncts to these main paths. *Jñānamārga* stresses individual effort more and aims at non-dualistic experience. *Bhaktimārga* stresses divine Grace and aims at the experience of a Personal God. However, these paths are not entirely different; they not only run parallel to each other, but also meet and criss-cross at various points. In their advanced stages it is difficult to distinguish between the two. To follow only one path to the exclusion of the other is rather difficult and may even be harmful. For the vast majority of aspirants it is better to follow a combination of the two paths, a combination of *jñāna* and *bhakti*. As a matter of fact, this is what most people do.

An aspirant who follows this path of synthesis usually begins his spiritual life by worshipping a holy Personality. He feels drawn to a particular Deity like Viṣṇu, Śiva, Devī or Gaṇeśa. Or he may feel drawn to a Divine Incarnation like Śrī Rāma, Śrī Kṛṣṇa, Śrī Gaurāṅga, Sri Ramakrishna or Jesus Christ. One of these he accepts as his *Iṣṭa Devatā* or Chosen Ideal. In most of the cases this attraction for a particular aspect of the Divine is spontaneous; the aspirant himself may not be able to explain why he is so attracted. It may be the influence of family tradition during childhood. Children born in Vaiṣṇava families learn from their elders to love and worship Nārāyaṇa or Viṣṇu. Gradually this colours their whole mind, and later on they find that they feel a great attraction for Viṣṇu or an Incarnation of His. In the same way, children born in families with other religious traditions learn to love the divine Personalities connected with those traditions.

While this is the general rule, there are exceptions. In modern times Sri Ramakrishna has come to occupy the centre of adoration in the lives of millions of people in India and in the West. All this shows that a man's attraction for a particular aspect of the Divine depends upon his mental make-up, which in turn is determined by his *saṁskāras* or latent impressions. Few aspirants are themselves aware of all these. All that a *sādhaka* usually knows is that he feels irresistibly attracted to a holy Personality and feels a compelling urge to worship Him (*Diagram I*).

In the beginning, he usually does not have a clear idea of the nature of Divinity associated with his Chosen Ideal, and he cannot avoid attributing to Him all kinds of human qualities. The great Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi once said that what the vast majority of people call God is a projection of each man's ego. The deep meaning of this statement is that every man's concept of Reality depends upon his concept of himself. As a man grows, his conception of himself changes, and correspondingly his concept of God too changes. People who are swayed by the passions of greed, hatred and fear conceive God as a Being endowed with some of these attributes. The concept of a jealous God in Semitic religions had its origin in this way. The Hindu concept of Kālī or Durgā is however, of a different category. It is based on a realistic understanding of cosmic phenomena. Anyway, whatever be the original conception about one's Chosen Ideal, one finds that it gradually changes as one progresses in spiritual life. As the mind of the aspirant gets purified, he finds that the Deity he had been worshipping is full of noble attributes like infinite love, boundless compassion and divine splendour (*Diagram II*). He now feels like dwelling on these divine attributes more and more which in turn brings about subtle changes in his own mind. Henceforth his *rūpa dhyāna* (meditation on Form) is accompanied by *guṇa dhyāna* (meditation on the attributes); he may even dispense with the former.

At this stage the aspirant begins to lose attraction for worldly pleasures. He is struck by the gulf separating his Chosen Ideal from the men and women around him. He sees the limitations and weaknesses of ordinary people, and while he feels compassion for them, his love and attraction for the Divine becomes greater than ever. He clings to his *Iṣṭa Devatā* all the more, and centres all his mind, will, reason and emotion on Him. He prays and meditates on Him with intense longing, and the Divine cannot remain unmoved for long.

The divine response first comes in the form of the awakening of the heart centre. A ray of divine Light touches the heart of the devotee and the 'heart lotus', as it were, bursts into bloom. The opening of the heart centre is the first most decisive and convincing spiritual experience, and it marks the awakening of the Jīvātman from its age-long slumber. The aspirant sees the image of his *Iṣṭa Devatā* living and luminous in his heart centre and finds that his own soul is permeated with that divine Light. He then finds himself partaking of an element of Divinity. It is at this stage that the aspirant discovers his own soul. He finds that the Divine is the source of Light of which the *Iṣṭa Devatā* and his own soul are parts. By 'Light' is meant not anything like the external light but the light of Consciousness, 'the uncreated Light' that Christian mystics speak about (*Diagram III*).

The experience of non-duality

In the next stage the aspirant finds that the form of the *Iṣṭa Devatā* has merged into the Formless. It should be borne in mind that this is an actual experience of a higher order and not just an imagination. There now exists a vast ocean of Light all around and within. In that flood of divine Light, body consciousness is lost, but 'I'-consciousness persists. The aspirant finds that while God is like a boundless ocean of pure Consciousness, he himself is Its centre. What now remain are the soul and the Divine, like a point and a circle. The point, the ego, is the centre with the Divine extending all around it in an infinitude of Light. The point, however, seems to be more real than the circle. Swami Vivekananda's definition of God and man may be remembered here: 'Man is an infinite circle whose circumference is nowhere but the centre is located in one spot; and God is an infinite circle whose circumference is nowhere but whose centre is everywhere.' [7] (*Diagram IV*).

Advancing further, the aspirant finds that his concept of Reality is changing. His own self becomes less and less real while the Divine appears more and more real. The ego consciousness gets steadily reduced (*Diagram V*). Soon, in the splendour of divine Light, the ego appears pale and insignificant. The Divine alone seems to be the only Reality (*Diagram VI*). Finally, like a star lost in the light of the morning, the ego consciousness is totally lost in the Divine. The one undivided, infinite Consciousness alone remains; this is the state of Advaita, non-dualism (*Diagram VII*). This is the highest state of spiritual experience according to the non-dualist school. It is described in the *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā* as follows:

> As on the destruction of the pot etc. the ether enclosed in the pot etc. merges in *ākāśa* (the great expanse of ether), similarly the Jīvas merge into the Ātman.

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[7] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1971), Vol. II, p. 33

> (This Ātman is) beyond all expression by words, beyond all acts of mind. (It is) all peace, eternal effulgence, free from activity and fear and is attainable by concentrated understanding (of the Jīva).
>
> This highest Bliss is based upon the realization of Self, it is peace, identical with liberation, indescribable and unborn. It is further described as the omniscient Brahman, because it is one with the unborn Self which is the object sought by Knowledge.[8]

Swami Vivekananda describes this experience in his poem 'The Hymn of Samādhi' :

> Lo! The sun is not, nor the comely moon,
> All light extinct; in the great void of space
> Floats shadow-like the image-universe.
> In the void of mind involute, there floats
> The fleeting universe, rises and floats,
> Sinks again, ceaseless, in the current 'I'.
> Slowly, slowly, the shadow-multitude
> Entered the primal womb, and flowed ceaseless,
> The only current, the, 'I am', 'I am'.
> Lo! 'tis stopped, ev'n that current flows no more,
> Void merged into void — beyond speech and mind!
> Whose heart understands, he verily does.[9]

Vijñāna — the integral experience

Is Advaita the highest spiritual experience? Hindu tradition holds that it is. Regarding this Swami Vivekananda says :

> In all religions of the world you will find it claimed that there is a unity within us. Being one with divinity, there cannot be any further progress in that sense. Knowledge means finding this unity. I see you as men and women and this is variety. It becomes scientific knowledge when I group you together and call you human beings. Take the science of chemistry for instance. Chemists are seeking to resolve all known substances into their original elements, and if possible, to find the one element from which all these are derived. The time may come

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[8] *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā,* 3.4,37,47, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Mysore: Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, 1974), p. 138, 194, 206

[9] *The Complete Works,* op. cit., Vol. IV, 1972, p. 498

> when they will find the one element that is the source of all other elements. Reaching that, they can go no further; the science of chemistry will have become perfect. So it is with the science of religion. If we can discover this perfect unity, there cannot be any further progress.[10]

The experience of non-dualism is thus the *highest* state attainable. But the real question is: Is it the *final* experience? Does Advaitic experience exhaust the entire range of spiritual consciousness? According to Sri Ramakrishna, for most of those who attain to true non-dual experience (not partial visions or glimpses) it is the final experience. They do not return to the phenomenal world.[11] However, a very small number of sages do come back. For them the experience of Advaita, though the highest, is not the *final* experience.[12] On the vertical scale of experience Advaita is undoubtedly the highest. But on the horizontal scale of experience other dimensions of Reality still remain undiscovered. A few exceptionally qualified illumined souls called the *Īśvarakotīs* take up the challenge of exploring these horizontal planes of Reality. After attaining the highest unitive experience, when these sages come back to the phenomenal world, they see it in an entirely new light. On their way up, the world and all its myriad beings progressively lost their reality and ultimately disappeared, but on their way down the sages see all these permeated through and through with the supreme Spirit. The awareness of Brahman forming the background or substratum of all phenomena is not lost but it is enriched with the knowledge of the immanence of Spirit in them. For this monistic transfiguration of the world, Sri Ramakrishna gave a new technical term, *vijñāna*.

Describing the experience of a *vijñānī*, i.e. one who has had *vijñāna*, Sri Ramakrishna says :

> The *jñānī* gives up his identification with worldly things, discriminating 'Not this, not this'. Only then can he realize

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[10] ibid., Vol. III, 1973, pp. 4-5

[11] See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., p. 82.

[12] ibid., pp. 175, 434-5

> Brahman. It is like reaching the roof of a house by leaving the steps behind, one by one. But the *vijñānī*, who is more intimately acquainted with Brahman, realizes something more. He realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof: bricks, lime and brick-dust. That which is realized intuitively as Brahman, through the eliminating process of 'Not this, not this', is then found to have become the universe and all its living beings. The *vijñānī* sees that the Reality which is *nirguṇa*, without attributes, is also *saguṇa*, with attributes.
>
> A man cannot live on the roof a long time. He comes down again. Those who realize Brahman in *samādhi* come down also and find that it is Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings. In the musical scale there are the notes *sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha,* and *ni*; but one cannot keep one's voice on *ni* a long time. The ego does not vanish altogether. The man coming down from *samādhi* perceives that it is Brahman that has become the ego, the universe, and all living beings. This is known as *vijñāna*. . . . .
>
> The *vijñānī* sees that Brahman is immovable and actionless, like Mount Sumeru. This universe consists of the three *guṇas* — *sattva, rajas* and *tamas*. They are in Brahman. But Brahman is unattached.
>
> The *vijñānī* further sees what is Brahman is the Bhagavān, the Personal God. He who is beyond the three *guṇas* is the Bhagavān, with His six supernatural powers. Living beings, the universe, mind, intelligence, love, renunciation, knowledge — all these are the manifestations of His power.[13]

What are the stages which a *vijñānī*, the man of integral realization passes through? When his consciousness comes down from the level of the Absolute, he first sees that Brahman manifests Itself as so many souls (*Diagram VIII*). Coming further down to the physical plane, he sees that Brahman alone has become the whole universe. He sees that all beings are manifestations of the one supreme Spirit, and that the differences between man and man are due to the differences in the degree and nature of this manifestation. It is at this stage that the sage understands the mystery of Divine Incarnation (*Diagram IX*).

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[13] ibid., p. 30

In the early stages of his spiritual progress the aspirant had to transcend even divine Forms; he then found that the holy Personality, an *avatāra* or a Deity, was only a shadow of the Impersonal Absolute. But now after attaining the mature spiritual experience of *vijñānī*, the sage sees the holy Personality in a new light. He then begins to understand the meaning of Sri Ramakrishna's statement 'God with form is just as true as God without form'. About divine Incarnations Sri Ramakrishna says :

> God has different forms, and He sports in different ways. He sports as Īśvara, Deva, man, and the universe. In every age He descends to earth in human form, as an Incarnation, to teach people love and devotion. There is the instance of Caitanya. One can taste devotion and love of God only through His Incarnations. Infinite are the ways of God's play, but what I need is love and devotion. I want only the milk. The milk comes through the udder of the cow. The Incarnation is the udder.[14]

In other words, though all beings — plants, animals, men, gods, goddesses and Incarnations — are all essentially one in Brahman, there is still a basic difference between man and *Personal* God. Swami Vivekananda has clarified this point in his lecture on 'Reason and Religion'.

> When Vedānta says you and I are God, it does not mean the Personal God. To take an example. Out of a mass of clay a huge elephant of clay is manufactured, and out of the same clay, a little clay mouse is made. Would the clay mouse ever be able to become the clay elephant? But put them both in water and they are both clay; as clay they are both one, but as mouse and elephant there will be an eternal difference between them. The Infinite, the Impersonal, is like the clay in the example.[15]

The fully illumined man, the *vijñānī*, may remain in any of the higher planes we have just now described. He may sometimes allow his ego consciousness to get totally merged in the Absolute (which Sri Ramakrishna called the *nitya*, the Eternal, the Immutable) or he may come to the phenomenal plane (called *līlā*) to enjoy the workings of this mysterious universe and to guide the struggling spiritual aspirants. As Sri Ramakrishna said :

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[14] ibid., p. 196

[15] *The Complete Works,* op. cit., Vol. I, 1972, p. 379

> A man should reach the *nitya*, the Absolute, by following the trail of the *līlā*, the Relative. It is like reaching the roof by the stairs. After realizing the Absolute, he should climb down to the Relative and live on that plane in the company of devotees, charging his mind with the love of God. This is my final and most mature opinion.[16]

Between the *nitya* and the *līlā* there are innumerable spiritual planes open to the fully illumined man who may dwell in any one of these as he pleases, experiencing the bliss of realization in many ways (*Diagrams IX*, *X*, *XI*).

It may be noted here that the idea of stages in post- Advaitic experience is not a new one. According to Vidyāraṇya, attenuation of past impression (*vāsanākṣaya*) and destruction of mind (*manonāśa*) must follow non-dualistic experience in order to attain full liberation.[17] This is also the view of Patañjali who recognizes seven stages in the highest form of spiritual illumination, the first four of which constitute *kārya vimukti*, and the last three constitute *citta vimukti.*[18] Vidyāraṇya classifies knowers of Brahman into four types — *brahmavid, brahmavidvaraḥ, brahmavidvarīyān* and *brahmavidvariṣṭaḥ* — according to the degree of the intimacy of the knowledge of Brahman they have attained.[19]

What distinguishes Sri Ramakrishna's description of the *vijñānī* from the traditional description of a *jīvanmukta* (liberated-in-life) is that the former belongs to a class of fully illumined souls (called *Īśvarakoṭīs*) specially commissioned by the Divine to teach the world; whereas the *jīvanmukta* is an ordinary mortal who continues in his bodily existence owing to the compelling force of his past *karma* (*prārabdha*). This distinction between the *vijñānī* and the *jīvanmukta* is somewhat similar to that between the *bodhisattva* and the *arhat* in Buddhism, which also recognizes several stages in the highest type of spiritual illumination. The *arhat* is an illumined soul who has got his own salvation after attaining *nirvāṇa*. The *bodhisattva* is an illumined soul, who turns his back on *nirvāṇa* (even though it is within his reach) in order to serve suffering humanity. He aims at the salvation of all the people.

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[16] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* op. cit., p. 196

[17] Vidyāraṇya, *Jīvanmukti-viveka,* Chapter 1

[18] Patañjali, *Yoga-Sūtra,* 2.27. See the commentaries of Vyāsa and Sadāśivabrahmendra on the above Sūtra.

[19] *Jīvanmukti-viveka,* Chapter 4

From all this we may conclude that there is practically no limit to the variety and extent of spiritual experience, as Swami Yatiswarananda says. That is why Sri Ramakrishna said, 'As long as I live, so long do I learn.'

CHAPTER 32

THE ATTAINMENT OF REAL FREEDOM IN THIS LIFE

The ideal of spiritual freedom

A man called at a pastor's home. He was met at the door by the pastor's little daughter. 'Daddy is not home', she told him. Then with a smile of confidence she added: 'But if you want to ask any question about salvation, I can tell you all about it. I know the whole plan of salvation.'

Salvation is not something one gets by talking. It is much deeper than most people think. It is concerned with the real nature of the soul and its ultimate destiny. Every religion has its own concept of salvation, but all of them agree that it is a state of perfect happiness which the soul attains to after death.[1] The question is, how to attain to this blessed state. According to Judaism, it can be obtained by leading a perfectly moral life. To this Christianity adds the clause: provided, one has faith in Christ as the only Saviour. It believes that through his death Christ redeemed mankind from the taint of original sin. Islam rejects this view. According to it salvation is entirely God's fiat, and faith in the final prophethood of Mohammed is absolutely essential to receive it. Hinduism holds that salvation means *mukti* or freedom. The search for freedom is an important factor in human life.

What is freedom? We hear of four types of freedom: Freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom from restraint of speech, and freedom from restraint of worship. But all these are limited freedoms, however essential they may be. They refer only to man's social life. All modern democratic states guarantee these freedoms to their citizens. But they do not necessarily guarantee the freedom of the soul. The soul of man is bound by the fetters of his instincts, emotions and beliefs. Even when he has all the freedom he wants in society, unless he feels that he is a free individual within, how can we call him a free man? We need something more. It is only when we realize that we are souls, will real longing for true freedom arise in us. Then alone will real spiritual life begin for us. The first sign of spiritual awakening is the change in our attitude towards ourselves. We then discover that we are neither bodies nor minds but souls — centres of consciousness.

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[1] Cf. Swami Yatiswarananda, 'The Type of Salvation We Want' in *The Adventures in Religious Life* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1976), Chapter 4

What gives rise to this idea of higher spiritual freedom? It is the soul's awareness of its contact with the Divine. As Swami Vivekananda has pointed out, there is a hunger for freedom in everyman.[2] But in ordinary people this urge takes a worldly turn — like the freedom for enjoyment, or political freedom. True freedom is the liberation of the Self from all bondage by becoming one with the Divine. An intense longing of the soul for the Divine arises only in a few rare individuals.

Owing to primordial ignorance, the individual soul remains separate from Brahman or the universal Consciousness or God. Jīvahood, or the consciousness of being a self separate from God, always means pain, bondage and limitation. Without getting rid of Jīvahood by attaining to Brahman, or realizing the Divine, none can become free. Jīvahood brings attachment and all the different forms of so-called human love and hatred, which only mean pain and misery. The Jīva has to undergo the cycles of births and deaths so long as it does not realize its true eternal nature. We want freedom and fearlessness. We want to break the limitations of the body and the mind and be free. We can never attain this so long as we cling to our different desires and passions and animal cravings. Self-realization cannot be obtained without the renunciation of all our clinging to body and mind — to our own body and mind, as well as to those of others.

True freedom

It is essential for us to have a true conception of freedom.

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[2] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), Vol. I, pp. 335-336

Do we want freedom *for* the senses, do we want license, or do we want freedom *from* the senses? Which is the right idea of freedom? Is it freedom to allow the mind to run after enjoyment, to be the slave of the senses? Is it freedom thus to dig our own graves? Or is it freedom to control all desires, to master all desires and become free from the senses and their cravings? Freedom for the senses, freedom to satisfy our lower desires, leads to sorrow. True freedom is total freedom from all sorrow, and this can be attained only by detaching the Ātman or Self from desires, from the senses. As Swami Vivekananda says:

> Blessedness, eternal peace, arising from perfect freedom, is the highest conception of religion underlying all the ideas of God in Vedānta — absolutely free Existence, not bound by anything, no change, no nature, nothing that can produce a change in Him. This same freedom is in you and in me and is the only real freedom.[3]

In the spiritual sense, freedom implies a condition in which there is not only absence of an awareness of restraint but also the awakening of a higher state of consciousness in which the soul realizes its true nature as the Absolute Self, the ultimate Reality of the universe. All the religions of the world have some conception or other about this spiritual freedom which they all regard as the *summum bonum* of life. Religious literature has various words for the kind of spiritual freedom we have in mind. Christianity speaks of salvation and redemption; Buddhism, of Nirvāṇa, cessation of desires and selfish activity. Hinduism speaks of total final liberation of the soul from all sorrow and bondage and uses words like *mukti, mokṣa, apavarga* or *niśreyasa* to indicate the highest goal of spiritual life. While in Sāṁkhya philosophy we learn that *mukti* means to free the soul from the threefold misery, Vedānta says that it also means the experience of Absolute Bliss.

The three kinds of misery are: the suffering caused by bodily illness, craving, folly and greed; the suffering caused by other creatures such as wild beasts, or by evil persons; and the suffering brought about by forces over which we have no control, such as heat and cold, wind, rain and earthquake. The Sanskrit word *duḥkha* implies something more than ordinary physical and mental suffering. It also means limitation or bondage. The real nature of the soul is, according to Vedānta, infinite consciousness and bliss. But in its empirical state it is limited, bound by the body, the senses, and the mind. The ideal is to free the soul from all bondage, which means going beyond the play of the *guṇas* or cosmic forces.

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[3] ibid., p. 337

As long as the soul of man is restrained, he cannot attain true happiness. Happiness does not lie in external objects. It is the inherent nature of the true Self of man. Ignorance eclipses the true nature of the Self. Thus ignorance itself is the greatest bondage. Ignorance gives rise to egotism. Egotism gives rise to attachment, aversion and fear. All these bind the soul and prevent it from experiencing boundless happiness which is its own intrinsic nature. However, there comes a stage in man's evolution when his soul awakes from its age-long slumber and becomes conscious of this bondage. When this happens he wants to attain absolute freedom by realizing his true Self.

Most of us, however, do not really want to attain this true freedom. We are satisfied with our present limited existence and its conditions. There is the story of a young mill-hand who had to be sent away to the state hospital for the insane. After he had been there for a few weeks a fellow worker visited him.

> 'Hello, how are you getting along?'
> 'I'm getting on fine.'
> 'Glad to hear it. I suppose you'll be coming back to work soon?'
> 'What do you mean? To leave this big fine house and this beautiful garden, and go back and work in a mill! You must think I'm crazy.'

Many people feel the same way about spiritual life. They are so much satisfied with their little selfish and impure lives that they think it is sheer madness to strive for the highest spiritual freedom!

The bondage of the Guṇas

Within us and outside us are working three cosmic forces: *tamas* or the dull forces of darkness, indolence and delusion; *rajas* or the tense passionate forces of lust, greed and worldly activity; and *sattva* or the harmonious forces of love and knowledge which lead to happiness. *Sattva* is beneficial as it makes the mind pure and luminous. Those who are weighted down by the dark tendencies of *tamas* go downward in the scale of evolution; others who are moved by *rajas* remain struggling all through their life without either going up or down, as most human beings do. But those who are established in the balanced harmony of *sattva* rise higher and higher until they realize the divine Reality.

But *sattva*, too, binds the soul by creating attachment to discursive knowledge and refined happiness. The manifestations of Sāttvic harmony like purity, devotion, compassion and self-control, help one to realize the Truth, but *sattva* itself is not the ultimate Truth. The goal is Self-realization, the state of absolute freedom of the Self from all bondage and ignorance. Mere righteousness and self-control will not be enough to help one to attain freedom in the highest spiritual sense.

Sri Ramakrishna used to tell the parable of a rich man who was passing through a forest when three robbers waylaid him and robbed him of all he had. The first robber then said to his fellows, 'Let's kill him.' The second said: 'No use killing him. Let us bind him fast and leave him in the woods.' They did that and went away. But the third robber returned and released the victim from his bonds and led him out of the forest. 'Follow that road and you will soon reach home', he advised him. The rich man felt grateful and said: 'But you must come with me. We shall be happy to entertain you in our home.' But the robber replied: 'It is not possible. I am a robber, and if I enter the city, the police will arrest me.' [4]

In the same way *tamas* tends to destroy us; *rajas* binds us to the attachments of the world and *sattva* produces in us the urge to attain *mukti*. *Sattva* produces virtues like purity and compassion which point the way to the supreme Spirit, but the soul must move steadily upward. The three *guṇas* may also be compared to the stairs which lead to the roof of a house, which stands for Brahman. *Sattva* is merely the last step of the stairs that leads to the roof. One cannot attain the knowledge of Brahman unless one transcends the *guṇas* by the exercise of the intuitive faculty which gives one special insight. Spiritual life is something more than moral life. Moral culture is no doubt indispensable but there must also be spiritual awakening. This comes through the constant practice of *japa* and meditation on the divine Reality, which finally enable the aspirant to experience the presence of the supreme Spirit in himself and in others. The soul can never attain spiritual freedom so long as it remains caught in the net of the cosmic forces which assail us all, but when the embodied soul finally rises above the *guṇas* it wins deliverance from birth and death, old age and pain, and becomes immortal.

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[4] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), pp. 154 and 207-208

Our human personality is a strange complex. Cosmic forces called the three *guṇas* which together comprise Māyā or the cosmic ignorance, produce the ego, the mind with its desires, and the senses with their tendency to become attached to the body and the outside world. This complex nature eclipses the higher Self which is our true nature. We must learn how to free ourselves from the bondage of our outer personality and from the limitations of our environment. Negatively speaking, the highest freedom is freedom from ignorance, the root-cause of all evil. Positively, it is the realization of the supreme Truth called Brahman, God, Allah, or the Tao. This is the real freedom of the illumined souls. Freedom or salvation is achieved through illumination which brings about moral and spiritual transformation.

Moral freedom — a step to spiritual freedom

The sixteenth chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* is devoted to a discussion about two kinds of human beings: those who are endowed with divine qualities (*daivī sampat*) and those endowed with demoniacal qualities (*āsuri sampat*). The divine qualities are fearlessness, purity of mind, knowledge, self-control, charity, sacrifice, straightforwardness, non-violence, truthfulness, renunciation, peaceful temperament, compassion and softness towards all suffering beings, humility, patience, etc. The demoniacal qualities are enumerated in greater detail, but in brief they include egotism, vanity, arrogance, cruelty and ignorance. The difference between these two qualities is due to the play of the *guṇas*. Those in whom *tamas* and *rajas* predominate tend to have demoniacal qualities. Those in whom *sattva* predominates tend to have angelic qualities.

If we observe our own lives, we find that both these qualities are present in us. We behave like angels sometimes and like demons at other times. The cause of this fluctuation is our inability to get established in *sattva.* Leading a moral life is not enough in itself. Ordinary morality is mixed with *rajas* which prevents man from getting spiritual experience. When the mind is purified of *rajas, sattva* predominates and the mind reflects the light of the Divine. But first of all *tamas* must be eliminated. Inordinate clinging to sense pleasure, lethargy and vanity must be given up. This can be done only if a man has true inner strength. The show of strength that many people make outwardly is usually a mask for cowardice. A truly moral man has tremendous inner vitality and strength. He has overcome *tamas* and has attained a calm and loving nature. But even this state is of no use unless it leads one to spiritual experience. Generally speaking, true morality leads a man towards the path of spirituality and freedom. That is why the *Gītā* says: Divine qualities predispose a man to liberation while demoniacal qualities lead him to bondage.[5] Morality is a necessary step in the path of spiritual experience which alone can grant total freedom to man.

To the extent we succeed in living a good life, to that extent we become morally free. But perfect and total freedom is attained only through spiritual experience which frees the illumined soul from the hold of ignorance which is the root-cause of all forms of bondage and sorrow.

Buddha said: 'By attaining Nirvāṇa the illumined soul is established in holiness and attains freedom.' When Christ said:

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[5] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 16.5

'And ye shall know the truth and truth shall make you free' [6], he was speaking of the spiritual freedom that comes only after illumination. As an ancient saying of the Taoists in China has it: 'When creation began, the Supreme became the world's mother. When a man knows his mother, he in turn will know that he is her son. When he recognizes his sonship, he will in turn keep to his mother, and to the end of his life he will be free from danger.'

Attainment of heavenly pleasures is not the goal of life

The concepts of heaven and other worlds of enjoyment have been present in Hinduism from very early days. But they were never considered the ultimate goal, the *summum bonum* of life, except by a small group of philosophers called the Mīmāṁsakas who believed that through ceremonial sacrifices (*yāgas* and *yajñas*), one could obtain admission to heaven. Hence they attached great importance to the performance of Vedic rituals. But in the Upaniṣads, in the *Bhagavad-Gītā,* in the works of Śaṁkarācārya, in the Bhāgavatam, and other scriptures, we find this hankering after heavenly pleasures strongly denounced. The Vaiṣṇava teachers too taught that heaven should not be the goal of a spiritual aspirant; instead the supreme abode of Viṣṇu, (*tad viṣṇoḥ paramaṁ padam*) the all-pervading Divine, should be the goal of spiritual aspirants.

According to Mīmāṁsakas the souls are real and many in number, and so also are the worlds of enjoyment. The souls, after death, go to these worlds according to the results of their actions on this earth. The Mīmāṁsakas do not believe in an omnipotent God or Īśvara, and their goal is not *mokṣa* or liberation, but heaven which they hope to win through the performance of ritualistic sacrifices. They, of course, do not believe in the One Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute — the Brahman or Ātman taught by the Upaniṣads — whose apparent manifestation is everything, internal and external.

By following the path of rituals and ceremonials one will earn some merit, no doubt. One may go to higher spheres, but then one has to fall down again because these places too are impermanent. There can never be an eternal heaven or an eternal hell. Everything phenomenal is controlled by time, and appears and disappears in time.

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[6] *Bible,* St. John, 8:32

> The man of sacrifices goes to heaven, worshipping the gods through sacrifices here below. Like a god he enjoys there celestial pleasures which he himself acquired . . . He enjoys pleasures in heaven till the merits of his good deeds are exhausted. Then, on the expiry of his merits, he falls down against his will, being propelled by time.[7]

One should not waste one's energy in running after the pleasures of this world or the next. True dispassion is one of the essential qualifications of a Vedāntic aspirant. Why go in for the perishable pleasures of heaven, not much different from those obtainable here, when it is possible for you to attain to the imperishable blessedness of communion with God, the source of all bliss? There is happiness of various types. The question is, which type do you choose? One must be very clear and definite about this. There is joy in self-indulgence and there is the joy of heavenly pleasures, but there is a still greater joy in transcending both and enjoying the freedom of the soul. Decide once for all which one you want. If you choose the spiritual path, if you fix God-realization as your goal, you must renounce all desire for pleasures here and hereafter. You must be prepared to face all the trials and tribulations that beset the path of such divine renunciation.

This does not mean that one should give up all actions. What is important is to give up the desire for enjoyment which prompts one's actions. All actions are to be performed without any desire. That is selfless work. When work is done in this way, it will purify the mind and make it fit for receiving the light of God. If you cannot perform your actions without selfish desire, then surrender the fruits of your actions to the Divine. In the *Gītā* it is said:

> By worshipping Him from whom all beings spring up and by

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[7] *Bhāgavatam,* 11.10.23,26. Also see *Bhagavad-Gītā,* 8.16.

> whom all this is pervaded — by worshipping Him through the performance of duty a man attains perfection.[8]

Worship the Lord with your actions. That is one of the best ways of worshipping Him. Even rituals and ceremonials are useful if performed with the sole intention of pleasing the Lord. They may be necessary for many in the early stages. But there are higher forms of worship. The spiritual aspirant should take up these higher forms of worship and approach the Divine more and more. If you are capable of taking up the higher forms of worship, why remain satisfied with the lower forms?

However, there is one point to be noted here. The highly refined heavenly enjoyments of the Mīmāṁsakas are definitely superior to the gross, vulgar, animal pleasures that ordinary people indulge in, right here in this world. The former is no doubt inferior to the bliss of God-realization and may have been strongly condemned by the scriptures. But they are far better than grovelling in immorality and corruption. The Mīmāṁsakas have a strong sense of *dharma*. In fact, of all the schools of Indian Philosophy, it is they who have discussed ethics at the greatest length. According to them, following the Vedic injunctions and avoiding those actions prohibited by the Vedas constitute the duty of man. One of the great exponents of the Mīmāṁsaka philosophy upheld the doctrine of work for work's sake, and his concept of obedience to Vedic injunctions is not much different from the categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant. *Dharma* (righteous living) has always been a sobering principle in all schools of Hinduism. In Hinduism fear of God is not so much stressed as the fear of infringing *dharma*. One is afraid of violating any law or religious ruling. Everybody must follow the dictates of *dharma*. An unprincipled man has no place in Hinduism. The spiritually advanced soul may transcend some of the grosser aspects of *dharma*, but nobody violates the fundamental principles.

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[8] *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 18.46

The ideal of Vedānta is the highest freedom

The ideal aimed at in Vedānta is to attain to a state that is beyond all birth and death, from which there is no falling off, a state of freedom. Freedom or liberation can come only by dissociating ourselves from our body and mind, in other words, from our false personalities. Absolute detachment from material objects is real freedom. Dependence on anything other than one's true Self is bondage and misery. The perfected soul depends on his Self alone, not on others, and enjoys the bliss of the Self. He is called an *ātmārāma* — one who revels in his Self. He transcends all kinds of gross and subtle enjoyments of the mind and the senses. To an illumined soul even heavenly happiness is a misery, because he has enjoyed a much higher state of happiness and freedom. Granting that heavenly pleasures are better than earthly pleasures, still they are not permanent and do not enable one to transcend one's limitations. That is why all serious-minded spiritual aspirants are advised to consider any desire for heaven an obstacle to spiritual progress. Instead of following the path of rituals and ceremonials, which leads to perishable results, one should cultivate more and more dispassion, knowledge and devotion.

Death is staring at you in the face and you are thinking of enjoyment! Such is the power of Māyā that we go on spending our precious time in all sorts of ridiculous things and creating newer forms of bondage forgetting the supreme ideal of liberation. Sri Ramakrishna's parable of the fisherman's net and the fish is clear in its meaning. A way out of the net is open, yet only a few fish escape through it. The rest bury themselves deep in the mud thinking they are cosy and safe there.[9] So also it is with us. This world which we think is the most secure place disappears from our eyes when death overpowers us. We need not have any morbid fear of death. But we should not be foolish enough to overlook its reality. If life is real, death too is real.

Salvation in Hinduism means freedom or liberation of the soul from all sorrows. It is a state of unalloyed peace. To live in that state of total freedom and bliss or the intense struggle to attain that, is what we mean by the term 'spiritual life'. This is not a state which is only attained after death. It is attainable right here in this world. A man who has attained this lasting freedom is called a *jīvanmukta.*

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[9] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* op. cit., pp. 11, 96-97

True Knowledge — the way to the highest freedom

The next question is: what prevents man from attaining this blessed state of freedom of the self right now? All schools of Indian philosophy agree that ignorance is the cause of man's bondage, though there are various opinions about the nature of this ignorance. According to Advaita Vedānta there is primordial cosmic ignorance called Māyā which hides the Reality, Brahman, just as a cloud hides the sun. Further, this Māyā projects this vast universe with all its infinite variety of beings. As a result, man does not know that his real nature is Brahman. All misery, all evil, all duality is due to the fact that we are ignorant of this central fact of our existence. Again, Vedānta says that this primordial ignorance can be destroyed only by the attainment of knowledge. Attainment of true knowledge, the knowledge of our oneness with Brahman which is Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute, is what is known as spiritual life in Vedānta. Even in the dualistic schools of Vedānta, the soul, the Jīvātman is looked upon as similar in its real nature to God or the Paramātman. The dualistic Vedāntins believe that in its embodied state the soul has its true knowledge in a contracted condition. This gives rise to ignorance of its real nature and the nature of God. Through spiritual disciplines and God's grace, the soul expands and gets true knowledge more and more.

Thus all schools of Vedānta believe that true knowledge is the soul's innate nature. According to Advaita, it remains veiled by Māyā and according to dualism, it remains contracted; that is all the difference. Spiritual life is the struggle to attain and manifest this true knowledge. That is why Swami Vivekananda defined religion as 'the manifestation of the divinity already in man'. In his inimitable words, he sums up what religion is:

> Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work or worship or psychic control or philosophy — by one or more or all of these — and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines or dogmas or rituals or books or temples or forms are but secondary details.[10]

The main task of a man's life is to assert his potential divinity.

True knowledge or direct experience is thus the test and criterion of spiritual life in Hinduism. This intuitive knowledge may be acquired either through self-effort or divine Grace or both, but without direct experience or the realization of one's real nature, one cannot attain complete freedom and bliss which are the goal of life. All the spiritual disciplines (called Yogas) of Hinduism are means for the acquisition of this direct experience.

Ego — the builder of the prison house

True knowledge blasts our false personality with all its false relationships, shifts the centre of our consciousness from the body and the mind to the Self, from matter to the soul. Our present personality is a combination of our body, senses, mind and ego. Spiritual life means breaking up this complex, shifting the centre of consciousness from this complex to the soul — nothing more than that. But this complex can be broken only through steady spiritual practice. This is very important. This breaking is nothing miraculous, nothing occult, but something very definite, clear-cut, precise — not at all mysterious. There should never be any mystery-mongering. Yoga is nothing occult, nothing mysterious at all. It is something very simple. We have erroneously identified ourselves with this curious combination. Spiritual life means being as simple as we really are, after breaking up the entire complex of our body, senses, mind and ego. In reality we are very simple, neither complex, nor combinations of anything. But this cannot be realized without prolonged and steady practice.

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[10] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 124

Ignorance binds all these things together. When ignorance vanishes, this combination continues for a little while, then it stops. Even if we stop rowing, the past momentum carries the boat to some distance. The test is whether we are ceasing to identify ourselves with the false combination of body, mind, etc. When the highest knowledge dawned on Buddha, he exclaimed:

> Many a House of Life
> Hath held me — seeking ever Him to wrought
> These prisons of the senses, sorrow-fraught;
> Sore was my ceaseless strife!
> But now,
> Thou Builder of this Tabernacle — Thou!
> I know Thee! Never shalt Thou build again
> These walls of pain,
> Nor raise the roof-tree of deceits, nor lay
> Fresh rafters on the clay;
> Broken Thy house is; and the ridge-pole split!
> Delusion fashioned it!
> Safe pass I thence — deliverance to obtain.[11]

First of all, we should try to separate the ore from all sorts of useless things like dust, dirt and sand, and then put it in the fire. This is first separation. Then all the dross is to be burnt away, leaving behind pure gold. This is purification. Similarly, in spiritual life we have to know through discrimination our soul as separate from body and mind, and then free it from the impurities of the mind through discipline. To the extent we practise sense-control, perfect continence (*brahmacarya*), discrimination, we get real knowledge. Knowledge cannot be got without that. To the extent we get knowledge, we become free from bondage and sorrow. And then, finally, the true Self shines forth filling us with supreme bliss and peace.

There is in all of us a knot between Truth and falsehood. This is our egotism. True knowledge burns away the knot, and when the ego or false self vanishes, we realize the true Self. We then realize that in our real nature we are all parts or aspects of the one undivided, immutable supreme Spirit, the all-pervading supreme Self in all beings.

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[11] Sir Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1943), p. 115

Real knowledge cannot be had without having attempted for a long time to attain it. This is where tremendous uninterrupted striving and practice come in. It takes a long time till a man attains the goal. Only a perfectly steady person has any chance to reach it at all.

Become free, and then help others

In us there are centripetal and centrifugal forces. Using the centripetal force we must get in, that is, we must reach our real centre of consciousness. All the various activities of our body and mind are connected to a particular centre of consciousness. We must find that out. That is the meeting point of the soul and the Divine. The centripetal power in us must be focused to enable us to reach this centre.

We have to make use of the centrifugal force to get out of bondage. The soul in its real nature is ever free. Whenever the soul asserts its innate freedom, it gets out of its limitations. We are only bound as far as our mind and body are concerned. Once we learn to have them under our control, we become free. The life of self-control is a marvellous life of freedom and strength. Real enjoyment lies there. All other sorts of enjoyments are so many worthless glass-beads that will break again and again, but this joy of self-control is constant and unchangeable.

By following the spiritual path and purifying our mind and heart, all of us should try to attain spiritual realization and freedom in this very life. Instead of asking us to stop short at some lesser ideal, Vedānta exhorts us to hold the highest ideal of Self-realization and freedom before us. If we fail to realize the supreme Spirit in this life, let us be prepared to pass through other lives and keep on striving until we achieve the highest illumination and freedom. Then in our humble way we may also help others along the path of illumination.

Our aim is to be free while living, in this very life. We must try to attain freedom before we die. Human birth is a rare privilege. It is only man who can strive for perfection and freedom. He alone can be conscious of a higher goal that transcends his immediate biological needs. It is therefore every man's duty to make the best use of his life for the attainment of this goal. All people may not succeed in attaining it now but everyone must strive for it. Let us attain partial freedom now, if not full freedom. If a man attains freedom from the hold of even one lower instinct, he is superior to those who are slaves to all the instincts.

Swami Vivekananda said : 'Be bold and face the Truth, be one with it, let visions cease.' [12] Many people try to build their lives on illusions. They live on a make-believe world. They imagine that they are very clever and are superior to others; they imagine that they are having wonderful spiritual experiences. But a time will come when a grave crisis will suddenly develop in their lives and then they will find to their regret that they don't have any inner strength to face and overcome the crisis. And then their lives collapse like a house of cards. Truth alone can save us. A life based on truth alone can survive for long. We must begin with our real life. Our ordinary experiences of life, sense experiences, even if they bring us sorrow and suffering, should form the basis of our lives — not our false hopes, dreams and fancies. It is not enough to fancy that you are leading a spiritual life. You must face the harsh realities of life and overcome them one by one. If you live a real life, not an artificial life, and painstakingly follow your spiritual path, you become fit to receive true higher spiritual experiences. When you are ready for a spiritual experience, it spontaneously comes to you. Spiritual experience is not what you had just imagined; it is a startlingly real experience.

Ordinary people are like weathercocks. They are under the control of their instincts and are constantly changing in all directions. A spiritual aspirant cannot live like that. He must get rid of the instinctive life. He must have a definite pattern of life oriented towards final freedom. He must discipline himself until discipline comes spontaneously to him. Then alone can he attain a state beyond all discipline. Discipline gives us spiritual experiences which in turn give us higher freedom.

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[12] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, op. cit., Vol. IV, (1972), p. 389

True freedom is necessary not only for our own sake, but also to help others. Only a man who is free himself can liberate others. You know the parable of Sri Ramakrishna about a scholar who tried to explain the scriptures to a king. At the end of each day's discourse when the Pundit asked the king, 'Have you understood what I told you?', the king would answer, 'O Pundit, first of all, understand it yourself.' The Pundit at last knew that he himself was bound by worldly ties, and so he could not free the king from bondage. When this knowledge dawned on him he renounced the world and became a wandering monk. Before going away he sent to the king this message: 'O King, I have at last understood.' [13] If we want to free others from sorrow, we should ourselves be free from it. A man who is overpowered by worldly temptations cannot serve his fellow men. So we must attain freedom ourselves in order to help others. To the extent we attain freedom ourselves, to that extent alone can we guide others along the path of freedom.

So the idea of spiritual freedom is not a selfish ideal as many western critics have wrongly assumed. In India thousands of illumined souls down the ages have worked for the spiritual welfare of the people. If India has continued to be the greatest sanctuary of spirituality even in modern times, it is all because of the efforts of countless spiritually illumined souls. Having attained the benefits of spiritual freedom they strive to enable others to attain it. Let us also strive hard to attain freedom ourselves along with our fellow men. This is the highest ideal.

May the evil minded become virtuous.
May the virtuous attain tranquillity.
May the tranquil be free from bondage.
May the freed make others free.[14]

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[13] See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., pp. 684, 909.

[14] दुर्जनः सज्जनो भूयात् सज्जनः शान्तिमाप्नुयात् ।
शान्तो मुच्येत बन्धेभ्यो मुक्तश्चान्यान् विमोचयेत् ॥

CHAPTER 33

LIFE IN FREEDOM

Liberation-in-life

Sri Ramakrishna was one day talking to his favourite disciple Narendra who later on became world-famous as Swami Vivekananda. 'Look here, my boy', said the Master: 'Suppose there is syrup in a cup and you are a bee. How will you sip it?' Narendra replied: 'I will sit on the edge of the cup and sip the syrup. If I move closer, I may get stuck in the syrup.' The Master laughed at this and said, 'But, my boy, it is not an ordinary syrup. It is the nectar of divine bliss. One falling into it doesn't die but becomes immortal.' [1] The Master was referring to the realization of Brahman. The Upaniṣad says: 'The knower of Brahman verily becomes Brahman.' [2] There are different degrees of spiritual experience. Very few people go through them to reach the highest experience of becoming one with Brahman. Many of us take a sip of divine bliss but hesitate to plunge. The reward of diving deep into the ocean of Brahman is truly the 'peace that passeth all understanding' — not brief intervals of momentary quiet but deep everlasting peace and blessedness.

A Vedic *ṛṣi* standing on the bank of a river declared: 'Hear! O children of immortality, even those who dwell in the celestial worlds. I have realized the great effulgent Spirit beyond the darkness of ignorance. Knowing Him alone does one overcome death and become immortal. There is no other way.' [3]

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[1] See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), pp. 410, 421, 645.

[2] स यो ह वै तत् परमं ब्रह्म वेद ब्रह्मैव भवति ।

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, 3.2.9

[3] श्रुण्वन्तु विश्वे अमृतस्य पुत्रा आ ये धामानि दिव्यानि तस्थुः ।
वेदाहमेतं पुरुषं महान्तमादित्यवर्णं तमसः परस्तात् ।
तमेव विदित्वाऽतिमृत्युमेति नान्यः पन्था विद्यतेऽयनाय ॥

Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, 2.5 and 3.8

Down the centuries, countless sages and saints in India have taught the same truth. Now, what do we mean by immortality? Though there is in everyone a craving for life and a terrible fear of death, few would like to continue to eternity as they are at present. Immortality does not mean only prolongation of life. It means first of all a transformation of consciousness. The ordinary human awareness is limited to sense experience; it does not go beyond that. When spiritual experience comes, it first brings about a transformation of consciousness. One then realizes that one is not the body or the mind but the soul. This is followed by the expansion of consciousness. We then experience that we are all parts of the supreme Spirit who dwells in all beings. Advancing further we realize that Brahman alone is the only Reality.

All the great religions of the world recognize the possibility of higher spiritual experience though theologians try to underrate its importance. According to Christian theology the perfect union of the soul with God, the most blessed state of spiritual freedom, is possible only after death. This is more or less the view of Islam also. However, a number of great mystics in these religions have tried to attain the mystical experience of oneness with the Godhead and enjoy supreme peace and beatitude even while living.

In Hinduism the highest ideal, the goal of life, has been held to be the attainment of total freedom, even in this life, from the clutches of ignorance and all its products: egotism, hatred, craving and sorrow. This total freedom is attained by the transformation and expansion of consciousness and the final realization of the oneness of the Self with Brahman. This is a state to be attained not after death but right here in this world while one is alive. A man who has attained to this state is called a *jīvanmukta* — 'liberated in life'. Śaṁkarācārya in his famous work *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, speaks about such a blessed man in the following terms:

> A man is said to be free even in this life when he is established in illumination. His bliss is unending. He almost forgets this world of appearance. Even though his mind is filled with Brahman he is fully awake, free from the ignorance of waking

> life; fully conscious but free from any craving. For him the sorrows of the world are over. Although possessing a human body he remains united with the Infinite. Such a man is said to be free even in this life. Good and evil seem to exist, persons and objects appear to be distinct from one another, nevertheless, he has come to realize that there is no difference between mankind and the supreme Reality, for he knows that all is one in Brahman; he makes no distinctions. That is how we recognize the man who is free. Men may honour him, men may insult him, but his feelings remain the same; just as rivers flow into the ocean but the ocean is not disturbed, so sense objects flow into his mind but he feels no reaction, for he lives in the consciousness of the one Reality. Such a man is free indeed, even in this life.[4]

One who is established in spiritual consciousness has transcended the moral conflicts inseparable from human life. With the elimination of evil desires through strenuous spiritual practice, there persists in him only the good desires which existed before the dawn of the supreme knowledge. Or he may become indifferent to all worldly ideas of good or evil and remain merged in the superconscious state. Through the will of the supreme Spirit some of these illumined souls are filled with compassion and return to the earth to become teachers of mankind.

> They are upheld continually in supreme spiritual consciousness, calm like the flame when its fuel is consumed. They are like the ocean of love that knows no ulterior motive, a friend to all good people who humbly entrust themselves to him. They bring good to mankind, like the coming of spring. They themselves have crossed the dreadful ocean of this world, and without any selfish motive they help others also to cross it. It is the very nature of these great souls to work of their own accord to cure the miseries of others; just as the moon of its own accord cools the earth when it is scorched by the fierce rays of the sun.[5]

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[4] Abridged from Śaṁkara's *Crest-jewel of Discrimination,* translated into English by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (California: Vedanta Press, Hollywood, 1947), pp. 122-24.

[5] ibid., pp. 42-44

Marks of a free soul

When Confucius (or K'ung Fu-tzu) the great Chinese sage said, 'At fifteen I had my mind bent on learning, at thirty I stood firm, at forty I had no doubts, at fifty I knew the decrees of heaven, at sixty my ear was an obedient organ for receiving truth, and at seventy I could do whatever my heart desired without transgression', he was describing the goal of life, viz. the attainment of perfect moral freedom. A freed soul is fettered neither by evil tendencies nor by conventional moral codes. Purity has become his essential nature so much so that he does not have to bind himself down by many rules of conduct. In the words of Sri Ramakrishna he is like an expert singer who cannot sing a false note.[6]

Another characteristic of a *jīvanmukta* is that he is free from egotism. Egotism creates the knots of the heart; it makes man's mind complex, difficult and calculating. Our attitude towards others is determined by the nature of our ego. With the attainment of the highest superconscious state all the knots of the heart are cut asunder and all our doubts are destroyed, says the Upaniṣad.[7] All moral conflicts are removed and we see divine harmony everywhere.

A perfected soul is free from hatred. It is impossible for him to hate others. The *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* says, 'When the wise man perceives all as not at all distinct from his own Self and his own self as the Self of every being — he does not, by virtue of that perception, hate anyone.'[8] A knower of Brahman is filled with love and compassion for others. He has nothing but blessings to give to others. His love knows no bounds of caste or creed or social standing. He loves all without partiality. Some of us had the good fortune to come in contact with a few of the illustrious disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. It was in them alone we saw pure unselfish love for others. From morning till late in the night they were occupied with the thoughts about our welfare.

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[6] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* op. cit., pp. 317, 435

[7] *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad,* 2.2.8; also see *Kaṭha Upaniṣad,* 2.3.15.

[8] *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad,* 6

A *jīvanmukta* is free from fear. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* says, '*abhayaṁ vai brahma*' (Brahman is fearlessness).[9] One day the sage Yājñavalkya went to King Janaka, the emperor of Videha. At the request of the emperor the sage taught him about Brahman, the pure Consciousness, which pervades and fills everything. The disciple was himself a highly qualified aspirant and so he could quickly grasp the Truth. Noticing this Yājñavalkya told him: 'O Janaka, you have verily attained fearlessness.' [10]

As Swami Vivekananda says most people live like hunted criminals. Their hearts are not free. They rush through life as if pursued by the devil himself and miss all the beauty and glory of life. They cannot sit in peace or move about fearlessly. In *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* there is an interesting story about a weaver woman. One day a friend of hers came to see her. When she left the room to prepare refreshments for her friend, the latter hid under her arm a bundle of silk thread which was lying there. When the weaver woman returned she at once noticed the loss. She then suggested to her friend that they dance for a while. The weaver woman danced with both her arms upraised, but her friend would raise only one arm, while the other arm was pressed to the body.[11] A liberated man has nothing to hide and he is fearless.

There is a tendency in people to brood over the events of life unnecessarily, magnify the danger and remain full of excitement. This tendency is to be counteracted by cultivating harmonious thoughts and sentiments. Instead of fear we must have courage, instead of morbid helplessness we need a spirit of healthy resignation which enables us to remain calm and follow our path irrespective of changes in the environment. When I sailed from Bergen (in Norway) for America in March 1940, there was the usual dancing and merrymaking in the ship on the first day. On the second day we received a wireless message about the German invasion of Norway and the fall of ports like Bergen to Nazi troops. This cast a gloom on the ship and all music and noise suddenly stopped. The ship's crew and many of the passengers became nervous and full of fear. There was no hope of going back to their homes in Norway, and there was the additional danger of the ship getting torpedoed or bombed at any time.

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[9] *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad,* 4.4.25

[10] ibid., 4.2.4

[11] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* op. cit., p. 435

During the Second World War, I was asked many times in the West: 'Swami, how could you remain so calm? Don't you feel the suffering and cruelty of the war?' I used to reply, 'Just because I feel it more than you do I am keeping quiet.' It is no use brooding over real or imaginary troubles and magnifying them. During the times of danger, we should think of the Divine more, remain calm and follow our duties as much as possible. In this respect we should learn a lesson from the lives of great men. Think about the death of Socrates. He was accused of crimes which he had never perpetrated, and was condemned to die for unjust and silly causes. Yet he did not feel bitterness towards his judges. In the celebrated dialogue called *Apology*, Plato describes the trial of Socrates. With indomitable courage and unshakable goodness of heart Socrates told his judges:

> Men of Athens, I have the warmest affection for you; but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength, I shall never cease from my practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting anyone whom I meet and saying to him to seek virtue.

Socrates left the court with the words which have since become famous: 'The hour of departure has arrived and we go our ways, I to die, you to live, which is better God only knows.' On the eve of the day fixed for his death some of Socrates' friends tried to persuade him to escape from the prison. But he refused. When the appointed time came, he remained calm as usual. He quietly drank the cup of poison given to him, walked a little to make the drug work, and lay down to die peacefully.

Perfect purity, egolessness, love and compassion for all, and fearlessness — these are some of the marks of a free soul. Moreover, he knows in the heart of hearts that he is the Spirit, unattached and full of bliss. When illumination comes, one knows the truth of it intuitively. Just as a lamp is not needed to show us the sun, so the dawn of superconsciousness does not need any external aid to understand it. The illumined soul attains supreme bliss and fulfilment in his Self and is perpetually immersed in it. Hence he is called *ātmārāma* — one who revels in one's own Self. Swami Vivekananda used to speak of the copper vessel containing the relics of Sri Ramakrishna, worshipped at the Belur Math, as *ātmārāmer kauṭa*, the box of *ātmārāma*.

Examples of world Teachers

The great prophets of the world, the founders of great religious movements are themselves examples of the total spiritual freedom we have described above. They are worshipped by millions of followers as special manifestations of the Divine. What is most valuable for us in the lives of these great ones is their boundless love and compassion for suffering humanity. Śaṁkarācārya, the great non-dualist philosopher, who wrote commentaries on the Upaniṣads, the *Gītā*, and the *Brahmasūtras*, besides several independent works, was himself the embodiment of the ideal of the freed soul about which he frequently wrote in his books. After attaining the highest spiritual illumination he returned to the relative plane in order to revitalize religion and guide people along the path of supreme blessedness. Many spiritual seekers went to him and some became his close disciples. With their help he established four great monastic centres in the four corners of India, and then toured all over the country spreading his message.

In the midst of his incessant activity he did not, however, forget his mother. He had a tender heart. When one day he intuitively came to know that his mother was on her deathbed, he hurried to his native village to be by her side. He enabled her to get the vision of Viṣṇu, the aspect of the Divine she had worshipped. Though a hard-core philosopher, Śaṁkara was full of the tenderest love and devotion for the great gods and goddesses of Hinduism in whose praise he wrote a number of hymns. The illumined souls are never one-sided or narrow-minded. Their enlarged vision embraces all.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa is considered by Hindus to be the greatest of all Incarnations. Right from his childhood he manifested the boundless love of which he was the embodiment. As a boy he lived like an ordinary cowherd boy playing with his companions. He was the adored darling of the boys and girls of Brindāvan. They loved him so much that they could not forget him even for a short while. Yet, at the call of duty, he parted company with them. When he came of age he went to Mathura where his maternal uncle, the tyrant Kamsa, was ruling. Kamsa had usurped the throne after imprisoning his own father, Ugrasena. Kṛṣṇa killed Kamsa in a duel and freed Ugrasena whom he made king again. After this Kṛṣṇa went to Dvāraka with a number of followers and established a new kingdom but he himself did not become the king. Ugrasena continued to be the king at Dvāraka also. Kṛṣṇa was a kingmaker. But wherever there was a rise of *adharma* (injustice) he interfered. He enabled the Pāṇḍavas to get their kingdom. In the great battle of Kurukṣetra he did not fight but only acted as Arjuna's charioteer and guide. He always practised the detachment in action which he preached through the *Gīta*.[12] Śrī Kṛṣṇa, though he lived the life of a householder, was himself totally free and unattached to the world. But he had boundless compassion for all kinds of people — from the poorest cowherd boys and girls of Brindāvan to the princes and princesses in their palaces. He was the embodiment of spiritual power and love. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Śrī Kṛṣṇa describes the characteristics of a free man in several places,[13] and all these he fully manifested in his own person.

The life of Buddha is a great light shining in the dark alleys of the history of mankind. Born a prince, endowed with all the blessings of life, he was deeply moved by the sorrows of life and the afflictions of people. After his historic renunciation and years of hard austerities, when at last he got supreme illumination, he was filled with lasting peace and fulfilment. For a time he lingered in this beatific experience, but his deep compassion for the suffering humanity made him come down from that lofty height, and work among the people.

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[12] See Swami Ramakrishnananda, *Sri Krishna, Pastoral and King-maker* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1973).

[13] *Bhagavad-Gītā,* Chapters 2, 12, 14

Buddha never spoke directly of God. To him Truth was God and It could be attained through purity and concentration of mind. He said to his disciples:

> I am released, brethren, from all bonds, those that are divine and those that are human. Ye also, brethren, are released from all bonds, those that are divine and those that are human. Go ye forth, brethren, on your journey, for the profit of the many, for the bliss of the many, out of compassion for the world.[14]

Jesus Christ was born in the family of a poor carpenter by name Joseph and his wife Mary. We know very little about his boyhood. At the age of thirty he felt an inner call to go about Palestine preaching a new way of salvation for the people. He spoke about the need for total purity in life and intense love for God. But his unique message was love for man, to love one's neighbour as oneself. It was not a fleshly love that he preached but a love based on the soul's kinship with God. His heart was full of compassion for the poor and the suffering, and he called to the people: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I shall give you rest.'[15] He was a true *sannyāsin* unattached to his kith and kin, looking upon all with equality of vision. One day when he was seated in the midst of a crowd, somebody came to him with the message that his mother and brothers were waiting to see him. But Jesus said, pointing to the devotees: 'These are my mother and brothers.' Then he made a remarkable statement: 'Whosoever shall do the will of God the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother.'[16] The central idea of Christ's teaching was God-realization, the realization of the kingdom of God within. His exhortation, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' [17] is a constant reminder to people immersed in worldliness and sensuality, about what true religion is.

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[14] *Some Sayings of the Buddha*, translated by F.L. Woodward (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 30

[15] *Bible*, St. Matthew, 11:28

[16] *Bible*, St. Mark, 3:33-35

[17] *Bible*, St. Matthew, 5:8

Caitanya was born in Bengal in the fifteenth century. In his younger days he was a brilliant logician and scholar. But at the prime of youth he underwent a conversion and, filled with intense longing for God, he renounced the world. The rest of his life was spent in a God-intoxicated state. He moved among the people preaching the name of the Lord to all without any distinction of caste or creed. Even criminals felt the touch of his love and were redeemed from their path of vice.

Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) was born in a remote village in Bengal as the son of poor Brahmin parents. Even in childhood he used to get mystic experiences. Later on he became a priest in the Kālī Temple at Dakshineswar, Calcutta. That was the beginning of a remarkable series of search and experiments in spiritual experience lasting for twelve years. Through intense longing he got the vision of Kālī, the Divine Mother. He then tried to realize God following the various paths of Hinduism. He attained success in all these paths in a remarkably short time and experienced divine Bliss in various ways. Finally he practised the Advaitic way and attained the non-dual experience of Brahman. Not being contented with all this he followed the paths of Islam and Christianity, and was first blessed with the visions of the founders of these religions, and finally the same impersonal experience of God that he had attained through Hindu disciplines. He then came to the conclusion, based on direct experience, that all religious paths lead to the same goal, viz. the experience of God.

The rest of his life was spent in an unbroken communion with God. He saw the supreme Spirit manifest in all beings. Utterly free from material taints, a blazing example of renunciation and knowledge, he lived like a child of God loving all without any distinctions of caste, creed or social status. A number of people — orthodox Hindus, young intellectuals, Brāhmos, Christians, Muslims — flocked to him and were uplifted by his spiritual power. He trained a band of monastic disciples who spread his message far and wide. Sri Ramakrishna re-established the ideal of direct superconscious realization of God, stressed the need for moral purity in life and the harmony of religions. His influence is now spreading in ever-widening circles in various fields of human activity all over the world.[18]

Sri Sarada Devi (1853-1920), the immaculate consort of Sri Ramakrishna, is also to be regarded as one among the world Teachers. In the religious history of India she is a unique personality. The ideal of Sītā and Sāvitrī is well known. But the ideal represented by the *brahmavādinīs* (women teachers of Brahman) like Maitreyī and Gārgī of the Upaniṣads should become more widely known. In her early life Sarada Devi lived the ideals of a daughter, a sister, a housewife, a spiritual seeker and a nun — all together, each in its best expression. Her unique life in the company of Sri Ramakrishna was an actual practical realization of the ancient Upaniṣadic ideal that the husband is not loved for the sake of the husband but for the sake of the Self, that the wife is not loved for the sake of the wife but for the sake of the Self. After she attained the highest illumination, she became an embodiment of the Divine Mother's power which she manifested as the mother and teacher of hundreds of people who flocked to her and to whom she granted protection, solace, peace, purity and spiritual awakening according to their needs.

Her early years were spent in household chores, helping her parents and looking after her brothers and sisters. At Dakshineswar she served her divine husband with one-pointed attention and also acted as a mother to his young disciples. After the Master's passing away she continued to live like an ordinary village woman incessantly working for the welfare of her innumerable disciples and devotees who belonged to all strata of society including some who had gone astray. Yet, she was revered by some of the great spiritual luminaries of the day, and she contributed substantially towards the growth and integrity of the Ramakrishna Order and Mission. The great Swami Vivekananda himself spoke about her: 'You have not yet understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life — none of you. But gradually you will know. Without Śakti (Power) there is no regeneration for the world. . . . Mother has been born to revive that wonderful Śakti in India; and making her the nucleus, once more will Gārgīs and Maitreyīs be born into the world.' [19] Never before had the world seen such a great manifestation of divine Motherhood as in Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother. She stands as a great ideal for the women of the world, and as the ever-compassionate, ever-pardoning, all-loving mother for thousands of weary souls.[20]

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[18] The two most authentic biographies of Sri Ramakrishna are: *The Life of Sri Ramakrishna* with a foreword by Mahatma Gandhi (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1977) and *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* by Swami Saradananda, trans. Swami Jagadananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1970).

The example of saints

We now come to some of the great saints of the world. Every religion in the world has produced a large number of saints. Deriving their inspiration from the original prophets, these holy men tried to carry the message of spiritual life to the doors of the common man. It is the silent work of these saints through the centuries that has enabled humanity to maintain its culture without falling down to the level of brutes. In the midst of wars and bloodshed, carnage and destruction, acts of gross sensuality and greed, which fill the barren plains of history, the great saints of world religions are like oases.

One of the earliest of western sages was Plotinus (A.D. 204-270). He was not a Christian but influenced Christian theology more than any other thinker through his school of philosophy known as Neo-Platonism. Born in Alexandria, young Plotinus had a tremendous desire to know the ultimate truth of existence. After knocking at the doors of various schools, he finally became the disciple of Ammonius Saccas, a great philosopher. He wanted to visit India and study Hindu philosophy but did not succeed. He spent his mature life in Rome, gathering a number of disciples, the chief of whom was

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[19] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1964), Vol. VII, p. 482

[20] For details of Sri Sarada Devi's life, see Swami Tapasyananda and Swami Nikhilananda, *Sri Sarada Devi The Holy Mother* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1973); Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1976).

Porphyry. In his biography of the Master, Porphyry mentions that Plotinus had experienced the highest superconscious state four times in his life. One of his successors, Proclus, pays this tribute to Plotinus :

> His soul, which he had always kept pure, took flight towards the divine Principle, prayed to It and adored It. He had always endeavoured to raise himself above the stormy waves of this brutal life which is nourished on flesh and blood. It is thus that this divine man, whose thoughts were always turned to the Supreme God and the unseen world, merited the privilege of beholding several times the immediate presence of the Godhead, who has neither sensible nor intelligible form, since he is exalted above intelligence and being itself.[21]

Speaking about this unitive experience Plotinus himself wrote: 'And this, therefore, is the life of the gods and of divine and happy man, a liberation from all earthly concerns, a life unaccompanied with human pleasure and there is the flight of the alone to the Alone.' The last words that he uttered before his death were: 'I shall restore the divine in me to the Divine that is All.'

Upagupta, one of Buddha's great disciples was a holy man. In the course of his travels, he met a charming young woman of loose morals who wanted him to be her lover. 'Physical enjoyments bring suffering in the long run', Upagupta said as he left her, but he promised to return if she needed him. Years rolled by, and the woman became a prey to a disease which ravaged her beauty until she was nothing but a mass of rotting flesh. She thought intensely of Upagupta and he returned to her at once. 'When my body was beautiful and adorned with silken garments and many jewels, you refused to come. Why do you come now when I have become so disgusting?' Upagupta replied, 'Sister, for him who sees and understands, you have lost nothing. My love for you is deeper than that love which depends on the vain outer appearance.' Her eyes brightened and hope returned to her. Ultimately she was able to receive Buddha's message of enlightenment and found illumination and peace.

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[21] Quoted by W.R. Inge in *Mysticism in Religion* (London: Hutchinsons University Library, Prince's Gate) p. 106

Christian mystics

Christianity has produced a number of mystics. Apart from the disciples of Christ, of whom we know very little, the earliest mystic was St. Paul. As a young man he is said to have been violently opposed to Christian religion. Then one day on his way to Damascus he had a wonderful spiritual experience. He saw a brilliant light which so overpowered him that he became blind for three days, and he heard the voice of Jesus Christ. This converted him to Christianity and he spent the rest of his life preaching the gospel of love for man. His whole life was centred in God in whom 'we live, move and have our being'[22]. He said, 'I live, yet not I but Christ liveth in me.'[23] He travelled far and wide and tried to help people to lead a God-centred life of purity and service.

One of the greatest saints of Christendom was St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) who lived in the thirteenth century. He was born as the son of a rich merchant and spent his youth in merry making with his friends. But after a protracted illness, he was converted to spiritual life and renounced the world. One day, while praying in a dilapidated church, he heard a divine Voice commanding him to repair that house of God. Single-handed he began to collect building materials etc. He had to carry all these on his head. Good humouredly he used to call his body, 'Brother Donkey'. His detachment from the world was so total that it gave him great inner freedom and he was always filled with great joy. Unable to contain this inner spiritual joy, he used to sing and dance improvising songs which later on became famous.

His spiritual vision enabled him to establish kinship with birds, animals, plants and even inanimate things and he used to speak of them as 'Brother Sun', 'Sister Moon', 'Brother Wolf', etc. One day he saw a woodcutter chopping down a tree. Francis told him, 'Brother, do not chop off the whole tree but give it a chance to grow', and gave him by way of recompense some food he had got by begging. He had great respect for the written word, and if he saw on the way a piece of parchment containing some writing, he would carefully put it aside so as not to be trampled on by others. When somebody told him that the writing he had thus saved might have been the work of a heathen, Francis replied, 'All words come from the mouth of God.'

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[22] *Bible,* Acts, 17:28

[23] *Bible,* Galatians, 2:20

He established the great Franciscan Order of monks who led a life of utter poverty, reminding one of the wandering *sannyāsins* of India. Though he lacked physical charms (he called himself the 'Black Hen') he had great influence over the minds of people and hundreds became his followers. Towards the end of his life he became blind and bedridden. But he bore his afflictions as cheerfully as ever. He had no fear of death and welcomed it as 'Sister Death'. His life was entirely consecrated to the Divine and he thought of himself only as His humble instrument. The most famous of his prayers given below shows his perfect abnegation.

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace!
Where there is hatred, let me sow Love,
Where there is injury, let me sow Pardon;
Where there is doubt, let me sow Faith;
Where there is sadness, let me sow Joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek
So much to be consoled as to console;
So much to be understood as to understand,
So much to be loved as to love,
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1227-74) was another great saint who has had profound influence on the Catholic Church. He was born in a family of aristocratic noblemen. But unlike his relations he had a passionate love for purity and spiritual life. At the age of seventeen, when he tried to become a monk, his enraged brothers imprisoned him in a solitary room and also tried to tempt him in many ways. He not only overcame all the temptations but spent his time absorbed in prayer and study. At last he was set free and he joined the Order of Dominicans. He soon became the foremost theologian of the day and his book *Summa Theologica* is the most authoritative book on Catholic theology. While about to complete the book, he had a wonderful spiritual experience and henceforth refused to write. He left his masterpiece unfinished. When he was questioned about it he replied: 'Such secrets have been revealed to me that all I have written until now appears to be of little value, as useless as straw.'

Some of you may have read the little book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. It contains the conversations and letters of Brother Lawrence (1611-1691). He was born of poor parents. At the age of eighteen he underwent a conversion when he saw a tree stripped of its leaves in winter. He began to think about the deep mystery and power of life which would make the tree produce fresh leaves and flowers after some time. This thought loosened him from worldly life and made him seek the Divine, the source of all life and consciousness. When he grew up he was for a time in the army and in the service of a nobleman, and finally became a cook in a Carmelite monastery in Paris. He worked in that humble capacity for thirty years with his soul enwrapt in God. By the constant practice of the presence of God even while engaged in the ordinary duties of the kitchen, he attained a high degree of spiritual enlightenment. In spite of his low social status he soon became well known for his holiness, and even noblemen and high church dignitaries sought his advice. About his state of mind he said:

> The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, when several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed sacrament.[24]

There are other great saints of Christianity like

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[24] Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (London: The Epworth Press, 1957), p. 23

St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), etc. What is characteristic of all these holy persons is the inner freedom they all enjoyed even when living within the narrow walls of church life, without getting their souls constricted by its sectarian views. Life was seldom easy for the mystics, especially in the Middle Ages, and they all ran the risk of being branded as the Devil's media and being burnt at the stake. St. John of the Cross was once imprisoned by some of his brother monks in a narrow dungeon for eight months. Even in that condition, surrounded by filth, he spent his time in continual ecstasy. His famous statement 'Man is created for God; and is called to strip off all selfhood and unlikeness to Him' represents the viewpoint of all Christian mystics in general.

Sufi mystics

A Mohammedan saint came to King Adam in Bactria and said: 'I am a stranger and would like to remain in your rest-house.' The king protested that his palace was not to be called a rest-house. 'To whom did it belong before you lived in it?' 'To my father, and before that to his father and his father's father.' 'Then how can your dwelling place be considered anything more than a shelter wherein people rest for a while before passing on?' The king was thoughtful. Then when he went hunting, in the depths of the forest he heard a voice: 'Awake, awake, before death awakens thee.' The king eventually left the world altogether to become an ascetic. He underwent severe spiritual disciplines. He attained divine consciousness and his heart became filled with love. Spiritual illumination made him free.

By and large, Islam is anti-monastic and anti-mystical. Yet it produced a number of great saints during the Middle Ages. Most of them were mystics. Islamic mystics are called Sufis. One of the earliest of them was a woman, saint Rābia of Basra (717-801). Orphaned at an early age, she was kidnapped and sold as a slave girl by a wicked man. Her new master was equally cruel, but one night he saw a strange light surrounding the poor girl, and getting frightened, set her free. She spent some time in the solitude of a desert and then lived like a hermit in Basra (in Iraq). Her spiritual experiences put her beyond the dualities of this world. When she was asked whether she hated Satan, she replied: 'No. My love for God leaves no room in my heart for hating anybody.' Her most famous prayer is: 'O my Lord, if I worship Thee for fear of hell, burn me in hell; and if I worship Thee for the hope of Paradise, exclude me from there; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not from me Thine eternal Beauty.'

The greatest of Sufi mystics was Mansūr Al-Hallāj (858-922), also known simply as Hallāj. He was born in southern Persia. Even in his boyhood he had a mystical temperament and sought advice from several Sufi saints. When he was a young man he went to Baghdad and became the disciple of Junayd, a well-known master of that time. After spending some years in seclusion in Mecca, Hallāj travelled to India by sea. At that time India had not come under Muslim rule and Hallāj was one of the earliest Sufi mystics to visit India where he must have had lengthy discussions with Hindu mystics. On his return to Baghdad he started preaching. The most famous and fundamental of his doctrines was ana'l-haqq ('I am the Reality') which is much similar to the Vedāntic dictum, 'I am Brahman'. The outraged Muslim theologians got him arrested and, after a prolonged trial, he was tortured and executed in a barbarous manner. But his ideas about the divinity of soul and the possibility of attaining oneness with the supreme Spirit influenced Islamic mysticism for several centuries.

Another great Islamic mystic and poet was Jalālud-Dīn Rūmī (1207-1273). He was born a Balk in eastern Persia. When he was a small boy his father incurred the displeasure of the reigning sovereign and had to leave his native place with his family. After long wanderings the family settled in Quoniya in Turkistan. Jalāl was educated in the Arabic universities and became famous as a great scholar. But his contact with a wandering dervish brought about a sudden conversion in his life. Thenceforth he spent a long time in contemplation. In memory of his beloved teacher he founded a new religious order called the Maulavīs who practised a kind of whirling dance to induce spiritual ecstasy. He wrote several books including the

Mathnavī, considered to be one of the greatest mystical poems of all times.

Jalālud-Dīn Rūmī looked upon God as the only Reality and the phenomenal world as a shadow of His. He believed in the pre-existence of the soul which according to him passes through an ascending series of stages of corporeal existence — mineral, vegetable, animal, human, angelic — before it finally unites itself with God. His allegory about a man knocking at the door of his beloved is famous. The voice from inside asks, 'Who is there?' and when the lover answers, 'It is I', the door is not opened. Later on when he comes again and knocks and, in answer to the usual question, answers: 'It is Thou', the door opens. The meaning of the allegory is that as long as the ego consciousness persists, full union between the soul and God is not possible. Through the large number of his disciples and through his writings Jalālud-Dīn Rūmī exercised considerable influence on the development of Sufism.

The disciples of Sri Ramakrishna

We now come to some of the great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna who form a class by themselves. Those of us who had the privilege of sitting at their feet found in them a unique blending of ancient spirituality and modern social awareness, a blending of the best in the East and the West, intense love for God and love for man. Their love for man was an expression of their love for God, for they saw the Divine in all men and women.

The greatest of Sri Ramakrishna's disciples was Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). The Master classed him among the *nityasiddhas*, the ever-perfect souls who are born on the earth for the welfare of mankind. Even in his childhood he showed signs of future greatness — uncommon intelligence, courage and power of concentration. Under the influence of college education he became an agnostic for a short time during his adolescence. But his contact with Sri Ramakrishna at the age of eighteen brought about a great change in his life. Under the Master's guidance he practised intense *sādhanā*, and at the age of twenty-three was blessed with *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the highest spiritual experience.

After the Master's passing away and at his bidding, he organized the young disciples of Sri Ramakrishna into a monastic brotherhood and set out on a journey across the seas to America and England and all over the world. He burst upon the American society with his message of Vedānta like a bombshell. After four years of preaching work he returned to his motherland which gave him a hero's welcome. He lectured at several places from Colombo to Kashmir, rousing the sleeping nation to the glories of its ancient heritage, and to the poverty and backwardness of the masses of modern India. His great heart bled at the sufferings of the poor and the ignorant. In India he stressed social service very much, and founded the Ramakrishna Mission with this end in view. His great compassion for humanity made him declare:

> May I be born again and again and suffer thousands of miseries, so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God that I believe in, the sum total of all souls — and above all, my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all species is the special object of my worship.[25]

When as young men, fresh from the college, we joined the Ramakrishna Order, we were ardent admirers of Swami Vivekananda. However, some of the other great direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna who were then alive told us: 'Now you have great admiration for Swamiji. Well, that's good. But you will understand and admire him more as you yourselves progress in spiritual life.' That proved true in our case. We soon came to the understanding that Swami Vivekananda was first and foremost a mighty spiritual personality, and his compassion for humanity was of a higher order: it was based on actual spiritual kinship with all men and women. He saw the Self hidden in all beings, and service of man was for him worship of God. That is the highest form of worship. The great Swami did not live to see his fortieth birthday. His life and message are a great force shaping the destinies of millions of people all over the world.

Another great disciple of Sri Ramakrishna was Swami

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[25] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,* op. cit., Vol. V (1964), p. 136

Brahmananda (1863-1922), regarded by the Master as his spiritual son. After six years of intimate association with his Master, Swami Brahmananda spent several years as a hermit in various parts of North India, doing intense austerities and spiritual practice. Swami Vivekananda made him the first President of the Ramakrishna Order and Mission. Swami Brahmananda was very well balanced in *jñāna, bhakti* and *karma.* He was most of the time immersed in higher spiritual consciousness but when he came down to the normal plane he was thorough-going in everything he did. He had great psychic powers and could see the workings of other people's minds. He was a fountain of joy. Under his able guidance the Mission underwent much expansion, and a large number of young, educated spiritual seekers joined the Order. He hardly delivered any lecture in public and was very careful in giving formal spiritual instructions to others. But he was a vast reservoir of spiritual power which he used for the spiritual progress of his disciples and for the welfare of others. Whoever came in touch with him felt blessed.[26]

Swami Premananda (1861-1918) was another great disciple of whom Sri Ramakrishna said that he was pure to the very marrow. When the main Ramakrishna Monastery was established at Belur, near Calcutta, he became its manager. But he lived a simple and austere life. His radiant personality and sweetness of temper attracted a large number of youngsters many of whom subsequently embraced monasticism. His love transformed the lives of a few young men who had gone astray. Shortly before his death he went on a lecture tour in East Bengal, and created a stir there by the power of his eloquence and the divine purity of his personality.

Swami Saradananda (1865-1927) was another disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, who later on played an important role as the first General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. After the death of the Master he renounced the world at an early age and joined the Ramakrishna Monastery at Baranagore. Swami Vivekananda first sent him to America to do preaching work, but soon called him back to shoulder the heavy administrative responsibilities of the Mission which he did with remarkable efficiency. Equally great was his work in connection with his service to Sri Sarada Devi, the divine consort of Sri Ramakrishna, and the management of her household. In the midst of all these duties the Swami found time to write the monumental biography of Sri Ramakrishna in Bengali known in its English version as *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*. The most remarkable thing about the Swami was his calm, gentle, tolerant disposition, and his great love for all. Whenever a devotee or a monk fell ill, the Swami was sure to visit him and lend a helping hand in nursing. He piloted the Ramakrishna Mission safely through its most difficult and crucial early years.

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[26] Swami Yatiswarananda wrote a longer article entitled 'Swami Brahmananda' in *Vedanta Kesari,* October 1941. Interested readers may also refer to *The Eternal Companion* by Swami Prabhavananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1971).

All the other great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna like Swami Shivananda, Swami Turiyananda, Swami Ramakrishnananda, Swami Adbhutananda, etc. were illumined men who dedicated their lives to the welfare of fellow beings.[27] Remaining ever in tune with the supreme Spirit these great souls engaged themselves silently and actively in promoting the welfare of all. They were embodiments of purity, compassion and devotion, and in their presence people felt lifted up morally and spiritually. Themselves free from all bonds, they strove to bring freedom to others. They have fertilized the thought world by their pure spiritual vibrations and prayers. Whoever comes in touch with their spiritual current is sure to rise to a higher plane of consciousness and feel inspired to lead a holy life. Let us offer our salutations to those who thus elevate mankind!

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[27] For a detailed account of the lives and teachings of these direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, see Swami Gambhirananda, *The Apostles of Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972)

CHAPTER 34

FOOTPRINTS ON THE SANDS OF TIME

India and Hinduism

A thoughtful Englishman, Ramsay Macdonald, has made a significant remark: 'India and Hinduism are organically related as body and soul.' India is the body and Hinduism or, to use a more correct word, *sanātana dharma,* is the soul. In spite of centuries of foreign invasions and political fragmentation of the country, there has always been a unity of Hindu culture and a free flow of pilgrims from one part of the country to another. Hindu religious culture is not only indestructible but also dynamic. In the course of its long history it underwent a number of changes. Here again the soul-body analogy holds good. The fundamental principles of Hindu religion, like the doctrines of Ātman and Brahman, God-realization as the goal of life, the Law of Karma, the theory of cyclic evolution and involution of the universe, etc., are the soul of Hinduism, and the practical application of these principles in life forms its body. The soul remained unchanged but the outer body went on changing from time to time.

The first great revolutionary change in Hinduism was initiated by Ācārya Śaṁkara. He established the Advaita school of philosophy on a firm basis. He was followed by the Ācāryas, Rāmānuja and Madhva. These three great teachers were born in three different parts of South India. They revived and re-established three different traditions of Hinduism, viz. Advaita (Non-dualism), Viśiṣṭādvaita (Qualified Monism) and Dvaita (Dualism). They restated the ancient principles of Hinduism in a systematic way and gave them a sound philosophical basis. They travelled all over India organizing people — mostly people of the highest caste — into religious groups through whom they infused fresh vigour into Hinduism.

How did the power of ideas contained in these philosophical systems reach the common masses? Through the saints.

India has from time immemorial produced, as it is still doing, hundreds of saints who moved among the people, irrespective of caste distinctions, and spread religion everywhere. They came from various strata of society. Most of them were householders but they were free from worldly attachments. They spoke and taught not in Sanskrit, as the Ācāryas did, but in the local dialects. Many of these saints were great poets whose soul-stirring songs are still sung even in the remotest villages of India. They taught love of God as the chief means to salvation. Some of the greatest among them were women.

The Āḻvārs of South India

One of the earliest groups of saints who rose during the post-Buddhist era was a group of Tamil saints known as the Āḻvārs. They were all worshippers of Viṣṇu. This Deity is mentioned in the Vedas. A special sect known as the Bhāgavatas who followed the cult of Viṣṇu, existed even as early as 500 B.C. in the north western parts of India. They worshipped Kṛṣṇa as an Incarnation of Viṣṇu. Some of the ancient Hindu kings, especially the Guptas, belonged to this group. So also were the Pallava kings of South India. The lives of Āḻvārs are shrouded in legends and it is not even possible to fix their times correctly. According to modern scholars they flourished between the seventh and ninth centuries A.D. What is important about them is that they were all great mystics and recorded their experiences in their poems.

There were in all twelve Āḻvārs. The earliest four of them were probably contemporaries. There is an interesting anecdote about the first three Āḻvārs, known as Poigai, Bhūta and Pey. One day during a storm these three wandering saints took shelter in a small hut where there was hardly standing room for all of them. Soon they began to feel the presence of a fourth person in their midst but invisible to them. This they knew was none other than the Lord Himself, and each one burst forth into a song describing his experience as he understood it. It is said that Poigai Āḻvār's experience was higher intuition (*parajñāna*), that of Bhūta Āḻvār was higher devotion (*parābhakti*) and that of Pey Āḻvār was transcendent knowledge (*paramajñāna*). When saints meet, they talk only of God and sing His glories. Whereas worldly people, when they meet, talk only of worldly things and argue and quarrel about them.

We moderners are losing our sense of poetry, our capacity to understand the highest emotions that filled the hearts of our saints and sages who were eager to share their divine love and bliss with all. Without these feelings man is a mere nothing. When the head and the heart are empty, what is left of us? The heart is to be filled with divine love and the head with divine ideas; and these in turn should find expression through holy action in our life. This is the central theme of spirituality, a point which we should never forget.

The Āḻvārs held the supreme Spirit to be dearer than the dearest. That is why we find in them such ecstatic love. These great saints of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism approached the Lord with different *bhāvas* or attitudes. The greatest among them was Nammāḻvār, also called Śaṭakopa or Śaṭāri, who belonged to the relatively lower Veḷḷāḷa caste. He composed four poems which are often called the four Tamil Vedas, the most important of which is *Tiruvāimoḻi*. In this hymn he speaks of the Lord as the all pervading spiritual Principle who also assumes the most beautiful human form for the sake of the devotees.

Another great poet saint was Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār who belonged to a tribe of thieves (kaḷḷa) and had been practising robbery for some years before he became a saint. Another famous saint was Tiruppāṇ Āḻvār who was born in a family of the so-called untouchables. He used to sing praises of Lord Viṣṇu and lose body consciousness in the ecstasy that followed. One day when he was thus seated in front of the famous temple of Raṅganātha on the banks of the Kāverī river, the chief priest of the temple came that way with water for the holy ablutions of the Deity. Fearing that going by the low-caste man might pollute the water, the priest shouted at Tiruppāṇ. At last he threw a stone at him. Brought back to consciousness by the pain of the wound, Tiruppāṇ ran away. However, when the priest entered the temple, he found the shrine doors closed. A celestial voice then reprimanded him for his harsh act and directed him to carry the wounded low-caste devotee on his back. The priest ran out and forcibly carried the frightened man on his own shoulders into the temple. The legend says that the doors of the shrine opened and the saint got merged into the image of the Lord.

Another important Āḻvār was Kulaśekhara. He was the king of the southern part of Kerala. Overpowered by divine Love, he renounced his kingdom to devote the rest of his life exclusively to the contemplation of the Lord, and passed his days in the precincts of the temple of Raṅganātha at Śrīraṅgam. So great was his humility that, it is said, he used to lie down on the steps of the temple so that the dust of the feet of devotees may fall on his body. He composed songs in both Tamil and Sanskrit. In one of the Tamil hymns he says:

> No kinship have I with the men who choose
> The evil when the good unmixed is there.
> Mad am I for the Lord, the cowherd groom.

That is the heart of the devotee longing for union with the supreme Spirit. In his Sanskrit work known as *Mukundamālā,* which is one of the most popular devotional poems in India, Kulaśekhara speaks of total self-surrender. He sings:

> Lord, I do not care for the so-called meritorious acts, neither for wealth, nor for the enjoyments of the objects of desire. Let that which is inevitable fall to my lot according to my previous *karma.* But this much is my cherished desire, that I should be endowed with unshaken love for Thy lotus feet in this life, as well as in the lives to come.[1]

> Let me be placed, O Lord, in heaven, or on earth, or in hell, as it pleaseth Thee. I shall even in death think of Thy holy feet which surpass in beauty the autumnal lotus blossoms.[2]

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[1] नास्था घर्मे न वसुनिचयेनैव कामोपभोगे यद्यद्भव्यं भवतु भगवन् पूर्वकर्मानुरूपम्।
एतत् प्रार्थ्यं मम बहुमतं जन्मजन्मान्तरेऽपि त्वत्पादाम्भोरुहयुगगता निश्चला भक्तिरस्तु॥
Mukundamālā, 7

[2] दिवि वा भुवि वा ममास्तु वासो नरके वा नरकान्तक प्रकामम्।
अवधीरित शारदारविन्दौ चरणौ ते मरणेऽपि चिन्तयामि॥
ibid., 8

The real devotee does not seek freedom from birth. For him escape from the trammels of the world is not a goal in itself to be prayed for. The greatest objective to be achieved is love for the Lord, who is also manifest in countless forms. That is the greatest ambition of all the great saints; that should also be the ambition in the hearts of all spiritual seekers.

Among the two or three Āḻvārs who were Brahmins by birth the most famous was Periyāḻvār or Viṣṇucitta. He used to spend his days making garlands for the Deity. His famous poem *Tiruppallāṇḍu* is daily sung in many of the important Vaiṣṇava temples of South India. In that unique hymn, produced by the ecstasy of love, the devotee blesses the Lord to live long for thousands of years, forgetting to seek blessings for himself!

His daughter was Āṇḍāḷ (or Godā) who is revered as one of the greatest women saints of India. From her childhood she had no other thought except about Kṛṣṇa. One day her father discovered her wearing the garlands he had prepared for the Lord, and scolded her. But a divine Voice told him that the Lord liked those garlands worn by her. She looked upon herself as the bride of the Lord. Tradition holds that the priest of the local Viṣṇu temple was ordered by the Lord to bring Āṇḍāḷ to the temple in a palanquin. Next morning Āṇḍāḷ decked like a bride, went in a palanquin with a number of people forming the bridal procession. As Āṇḍāḷ entered the inner shrine, the Lord received her and she merged into His divine body. Later on a magnificent temple was erected at Srīvillipputtūr, Āṇḍāḷ's birthplace, and a temple festival is conducted to celebrate the event even to this day.

Āṇḍāḷ was a gifted poet. Her poem *Tiruppāvai* is sung all over South India during the month of *Mārgaśīrṣa*. In one of the stanzas of this poem she describes how by dwelling on the Lord's glory and meditating on Him all evils cease:

When thus all pure we come, strewing fair flowers,
Adoring, and with songs upon our lips,
And meditating in our hearts on Him —
Māyan, the child of northern Mathura;
The Ruler of great Jamunā's sacred stream;

The shining lamp which in the shepherd caste appeared,
Dāmodaran, who brightly lit His mother's womb;
Faults past and faults to come cease,
Like to cotton that within the fire flames into dust.
Ah, *Elorembāvāy!*

Āṇḍāḷ is one of the best examples of bridal mysticism in India. The devotee looks upon herself as the bride and the Lord as the bridegroom. The purified soul longs for the eternal presence of the Lord who is the Soul of all souls. Āṇḍāḷ fully utilized her power of imagination in constantly dwelling on her beloved Lord. It is an example of how to sublimate our mental powers which are usually spent in imagining all kinds of morbid things. Very touchingly she describes the play of Śrī Kṛṣṇa:

Thou born as one woman's son, and in one night
Was concealed and reared as another's child,
Thou mighty *māl* (wrestler) who wast very fire
In Kamsa's heart stirred unendurably;
Thwarting the evil purpose that he planned;
With longing after Thee we have come.
And if the drum Thou but bestow,
Then we will sing Thy bounty
That is worthy Lakṣmī's self;
Sing too Thy might.
And all our trouble gone, we will rejoice;
Ah, *Elorembāvāy!*

All the available poems and hymns of the Āḷvārs were collected into a monumental work called the *Nālāyira Prabandham* by a great Vaiṣṇava teacher named Nāthamuni. This book is considered so sacred by the Śri Vaiṣṇavites of South India that they call it *Anubhava Vedānta,* the Vedānta of direct experience, which indeed it is. Nāthamuni's successor was Yāmunācārya who was followed by Rāmānujācārya, the greatest figure in the revival of *bhakti* movement in South India. Born in 1017 A.D. in a pious Brahmin family, Rāmānuja first studied Hindu scriptures under a famous Advaitic scholar by name Yādavaprakāśa. His devotional mind could not however, accept the Advatic doctrine, and he developed his own ideas in which he tried to synthesize devotion and knowledge. He wrote commentaries on the *Brahma-Sūtras* and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. His philosophy known as Viśiṣṭādvaita holds that God, the souls and the universe together form one Reality. God is the supreme Spirit who is all-pervading and transcendent. The universe comes out of Him and returns to Him in cycles, each cycle lasting several million years. All souls are likewise totally dependent on Him. In the spiritual path self-realization comes first and then God-realization which, according to Rāmānuja, is possible only through God's grace. He thus gave *bhakti* supreme importance as a spiritual discipline.

Apart from re-establishing the supremacy of *bhakti* and the cult of Viṣṇu, Rāmānuja organized his followers into a distinct community, gave great impetus to the study of both Sanskrit and Tamil scriptures, and also tried to spread the religion among non-Brahmins as well. His liberal mind is shown in accepting a Śūdra as one of his *gurus* and in his imparting the sacred *mantra* of Nārāyaṇa to a large assembly of people. His teacher Goṣṭhi Pūrṇa had initiated him into this *mantra* after instructing him not to reveal it to anyone. The punishment of disobeying one's *guru* was going to hell. But Rāmānuja climbed the *gopuram* (tower) of the temple and openly revealed the *mantra* to the large number of people who had gathered there. On being questioned by his teacher about the propriety of his conduct, Rāmānuja said that if by *his* going to hell so many people could be saved, he would prefer that to his own personal salvation.

Rāmānuja travelled far and wide in India in order to spread his views. He was the first great Ācārya to place *bhakti* on a philosophical footing. Yāmunācārya had done a great service to the cause of *bhakti* by admitting the works of Āḷvār saints into the fold of Vedānta, and he had laid the foundation of Viśiṣṭādvaita. But it was Rāmānuja who built the towering philosophical edifice which has ever since influenced all subsequent Hindu religious movements in India, directly or indirectly. The *bhakti* movement in North India is traceable to his influence.

The Śaiva saints (Nāyanmārs) of South India

According to one tradition, the worship of Śiva was introduced in South India from the North by a saint called Tirumūlar. Whether this is true or not, Śiva worship has great antiquity all over India. In the South it is associated with the sixty-three saints called Nāyanmārs whose images are found in all the important Śiva temples in Tamil Nadu. Like the Vaiṣṇava Āḷvārs, the Śiva saints belonged to all castes. There were Brahmins, kings, potters, merchants, farmers, hunters, shepherds and fishermen among them. It is difficult to determine the period of all of them. The four most important among them, called the great Ācāryas, lived between the seventh and ninth centuries A.D. They were Appar, Jñānasambandhar, Sundaramūrti and Māṇikkavācakar. The hymns of the first three are together called *Devāram* and those of the last saint are called *Tiruvācakam*. These are sung in all the important Śiva temples in the South. These four saints represent four different attitudes towards God. Appar followed the path of the servant (*dāsa mārga*), Jñānasambandhar followed the path of the good son (*sat-putra mārga*), Sundaramurti followed the path of the friend (*saha mārga*) and Mānikkavācakar followed what is called the true path (*sat mārga*), that is, the path of knowledge.

The lives of great saints are full of miracles. Appar was born in the relatively low caste of Veḷḷāḷas. In early age he embraced Jainism but was reconverted into Śaivism by the influence of his elder sister. He then spent his life moving from place to place singing the glories of Lord Śiva and doing humble work in temple premises, like removing the weeds etc. His poems reveal a mind of high order. In one of these he sings:

As fire in wood, as ghee in milk,
The Luminous One lies hid within.
First fix the churning rod of Love,
Pass round the cord, intelligence,
Then twirl — and God will bless thy sight.

Another hymn says,

He our mother and father, He our brother and sister,

He the creator of the three worlds; if we can remember in our hearts
The Beloved of the Gods and the Dweller in the flower-city,
Will He be the unseen Helper of all.

The word 'Appar' means father. He got this name because another saint Jñānasambandhar addressed him this way. This younger saint came from a Brahmin family. It is said that when Sambandhar was a small child, Goddess Pārvatī Herself came down to the earth and fed him as a mother. After that he blossomed into a child prodigy and a great saint. He died at the age of sixteen.

The third great saint was Sundaramūrti, born of Brahmin parents. It is said that at the time fixed for his marriage Lord Śiva Himself came in the guise of an old man and claimed him to be his bond-slave. He thereafter wandered all over the South praising Lord Śiva. He is also said to have died in his youth.

The fourth great saint was Māṇikkavācakar. He is also said to be a Brahmin and in his youth became the chief minister of the Pāṇḍya monarch. He was once entrusted with the task of buying horses. But on the way he had a vision of Śiva as his *guru,* and at His behest spent the money meant for the purchase of horses, in building a Śiva temple. Forgetting his ministerial duties he lived there serving the Lord. The book of his hymns called *Tiruvācakam* is one of the most popular devotional books in South India, and is said to be of the highest literary merit. There is a Tamil saying that declares that nothing can melt the heart of the man whose heart does not melt on hearing the hymns of this saint. He preached an uncompromising monotheism, and love for God as the means of attaining Him. But his love of God was tempered with knowledge. In *Tiruvācakam* he says:

Beyond created time and space art Thou,
  Without beginning and end.
Yet Thou dost create the many worlds
  Preserve, destroy, procreate.
And through manifold births, Thou leadest me
  By Thy grace to dedicated service.

Imperceptible as the fragrance,
  Thou art afar and yet so near
O inscrutable mystery,
  Who eludes speech and thought.
Indissoluble as the sweet juice of cane and cream
  Commingled in the fresh pure milk,
Thy distilled bliss permeates
  In the hearts of Thy beloved devotees.
Our mighty Lord! Who cleaves asunder
  The continuity of births.

The whole of the great book is full of deep insights into the mystery of creation, God's real nature, and the soul's experience of the Divine. But everything is blended with intense love. Lines like the following are found throughout the book:

Haste, Oh haste with the garland
Bind His feet;
Encircle, gather round, follow and leave not,
Clasp Him, tho' He eludes.
The incomparable One trumpeted His coming
Made me His own — a sage He came and showed Himself to me.

The book *Tiruvācakam* also describes the various stages through which the soul passes until it is united with the supreme Spirit. The great saint is said to have died at the age of thirty-two.

Of the remaining saints Kaṇṇappar, the hunter, and Nandanār, the untouchable, are the most famous. There were three women saints also of whom the most remarkable was Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār. In her youth she was very beautiful and was married to a rich merchant. Soon the young husband found that she was a saint endowed with extraordinary purity and devotion. He did not want to lead a worldly life with her. He secretly left the place, settled in a distant country, and married another woman. When Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār heard of this, she went to see him. But the husband and his new wife fell at her feet and told her relatives that they looked upon her as a divine person. When the saintly lady knew that her married life was at an end, she prayed to Lord Śiva to take away her celestial beauty. Immediately she was turned into a hideous-looking old woman. Ladies can appreciate the greatness of this sacrifice more than anybody else! She spent the rest of her life in a place called Tiruvālangāḍu, utterly free from body consciousness, ever witnessing the great cosmic dance of Lord Śiva. It is said that the Lord Himself addressed her as His 'mother'. About her attainment of the final goal she says in one of her poems:

> We have conquered death and avoided hell. We have uprooted the bonds of good and evil *karma* — all this has been achieved by uniting ourselves with the sacred Feet of the Lord who has burnt to ashes the fortress of the Tripurāsuras with the fire of His eye.

Apart from the sixty-three ancient canonical saints, there were also other saints who came later. One among them was Paṭṭinattār who lived sometime before the tenth century. He was a rich merchant who carried on a large trade by sea. One day he learnt that one of his storm-tossed vessels laden with rich merchandise had arrived safely in the harbour. In a very jubilant mood he went to the harbour. In his absence a mendicant holy man called at his house for alms. The lady of the house asked him to wait until her husband's return. But he did not care to do so. Instead, he left the place leaving behind a small packet. When Paṭṭinattār returned home, his wife gave him the packet. On opening it he saw only a broken, eyeless needle. The truth suddenly flashed in his mind that after his death not even such a worthless thing as an eyeless needle would accompany him. He immediately distributed his wealth among the poor, renounced the world, and thenceforth lived the life of a mendicant. Another man who had formerly been a king joined him as his disciple and both of them wandered from place to place for several years singing songs.

Having acquired a childlike nature he used to play with shepherd children. One day the urchins dug a pit, made him stand in it, and covered the pit up to his chin with the excavated earth — all in fun. But suddenly there was a heavy downpour and the children ran away forgetting all about the old man. Exposed all night to the cold wind and rain, the saint expired. The poems left by Paṭṭinattār speak of the impermanence of sense enjoyments, evanescence of life and the need to awaken to a godly life. His moral epigrams are used as proverbs all over Tamil Nadu.

The line of Śaiva saints has been maintained unbroken up to the present day. This is a privilege we enjoy in this poor country of ours, materially poor, but rich in spiritual tradition. In the eighteenth century there lived Tāyumānavar, one of the greatest and certainly the most popular of Śaiva saints in the South. As a young man he became a steward in the palace of a king and gained good mastery over Tamil and Sanskrit devotional and philosophical literature. He came across a sage who was observing *mouna* (silence) and got much attached to him. It is said that the widowed queen offered herself and her kingdom to the young man who spurned the offer and left the place. He then went to another place, married a pious girl, and lived a virtuous life. When his only child came of age, the silent sage suddenly appeared before him and reminded him that it was time for him to renounce the world. Tāyumānavar spent the rest of his life as a wandering minstrel singing his highly philosophical poems in which he tried to reconcile Vedānta and Śaiva Siddhānta, the philosophy of South Indian Śaiva saints.

According to Tāyumānavar, God, soul and nature are the three ultimate categories. Just as the sun energizes the living world, so God sustains and enlivens all the souls and nature. In one of his works called 'Revel in Bliss' (*Ānandakkaḷippu*) he describes the nature of the final realization and shows how *bhakti* and *jñāna* become one at the highest experience. Tāyumānavar was a great poet and a mystic of a very high order.

The teachings of Śaiva saints were codified in the form of twelve Sūtras (aphorisms) by a sage named Meykaṇḍār in the thirteenth century. His work called *Śivajñāna Bodham* was commented on by his disciple Aruḷnandi. This philosophy resembles Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita in several respects.

We have till now spoken only about the great saints of

Tamil Nadu. Other parts of South India too produced many saints. I shall mention only two of these who belonged to Karnataka. One was the Vaiṣṇava saint by name Purandaradāsa who is universally recognized as the father of Karnātic or South Indian system of music. Originally a wealthy man well known for his miserliness, he later on gave up all his wealth and lived the life of a humble devotee of Viṭhṭhala, the famous Deity of Paṇḍharpūr in Maharashtra. His delightful songs — thousands of them are known — can be heard all over South India.

The other saint was Basaveśvara, who was a great devotee of Śiva and a great reformer of the twelfth century. It is said that he was a Brahmin by birth and became the king's minister. His *vacanas* (epigrammatic poems) speak of the equality of man before God, need for purity and devotion to Śiva. He is regarded as the founder of the *Vīraśaiva* philosophy and sect which originally started as a movement against caste and social injustice. The whole universe is, in this system, looked upon as Śiva's *krīḍa* (play). One of the great women saints of this sect was Akka Mahādevī. Though married to a prince, she renounced the world and spent her time in the forest of Śrī Śailam, a mountain peak. Her poems are famous all over Karnataka and they reveal her intense love for Śiva whom she called Chenna Mallikārjuna. As she progressed in spiritual life she had the experience of the all-pervading presence of God in every being. In one of her poems she says:

All the forest is You,
All the glorious trees of the forest are You,
All the birds and beasts that move among the trees are You,
O Chenna Mallikārjuna, reveal to me Your face, pervading everything.[3]

About the highest spiritual experience she says:

I do not say it is the *liṅga,*
I do not say it is oneness with the *liṅga,*
I do not say it is union,

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[3] *Women Saints of East and West* (Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre of London, 1955), p. 39

I do not say it is harmony,
I do not say it has occurred,
I do not say it has not occurred,
I do not say it is you,
I do not say it is I,
After becoming one with the *linga* in Chenna Mallikārjuna,
I say nothing whatever.[4]

Saints of Maharshatra

The saints of Maharashtra belong to two schools: the *Vārakarīs* or mild devotees who include the great saints Jñāneśvar, Nāmdev, Eknāth and Tukārām; and the *Dhārakarīs* or heroic devotees who include Samartha Rāmdās and his followers. The first school was based on the cult of Viṭhṭhala, the chief Deity of Paṇḍharpūr in Maharashtra. The first and the greatest of these saints was Jñāneśvar (or Jñāndev) who lived in the thirteenth century A.D. He and his brother Nivṛttināth were trained in the way of Nātha *yogīs* but in his writings Jñāneśvar mingles Nātha tradition with Vedānta and it is this synthetic approach that became popular in Maharashtra.

Jñāneśvar was the second son of his parents, Viṭhṭhalpant and Rakhumābāi. His father had, after his marriage, renounced the world and sought *sannyāsa* from Rāmānanda, the great sage who was the fountain-head of *bhakti* movement in North India. Without knowing that Viṭhṭhalpant was a householder, Rāmānanda admitted him into the holy *sannyāsa* order. But later on when he came to know the truth, he asked his disciple to go back home and lead a householder's life. Viṭhṭhalpant obeyed his *guru,* and three sons and a daughter were born to him in due course. But breaking the vow of *sannyāsa* was considered a great sin by the local Brahmins who excommunicated the family. It is said that both Viṭhṭhalpant and his wife committed suicide orphaning the children Nivṛttināth, Jñāndev, Sopān and Muktābāi. But the children by their holy lives impressed the Brahmins so much that they were admitted back into their caste.

According to tradition the eldest brother Nivṛttināth was initiated by Gahinīnāth (the disciple of the great *yogī* Gorakṣanāth) and he in turn initiated Jñāndev. Thus through them the doctrine of Nātha school entered Maharashtra mysticism. The brothers and the sister wandered all over the country singing the glories of God. Jñāndev died at the early age of twenty-two. But by then he had composed the *Jñāneśvarī,* one of the greatest mystical works in the world, the *Amṛtānubhava,* and many *abhangs* (lyrics) in Marāthī language. Though *Jñāneśvarī* is supposed to be a commentary on the *Gītā,* it actually expounds his own synthetic philosophy and personal spiritual experiences. It is the confluence of the four great religious paths — *karma,* Yoga, *bhakti* and *jñāna.* Jñāndev does not take the view of the extreme non-dualist. According to him God is both immanent and transcendent. He gives the example of the ocean and the waves. God is the ocean and the souls and the universe are waves and bubbles. All his works are full of illustrations of this type and are of great poetic charm and elegance of expression. Speaking about the highest Truth which transcends all duality, he says: 'It is like the beauty that has not yet assumed any form, or like the holiness of a virtuous act before it is performed. It transcends all generality. Silence is the greatest speech in its case.' Jñāndev's sister Muktābāi has also left behind many *abhangs* of great spiritual and poetic value.

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[4] ibid., p. 40

The next great saint of the same tradition was Nāmdev. He was a contemporary of Jñāneśvar. In fact, at that time a number of great saints were living in Maharashtra who were devotees of Lord Viṭhṭhala. They all formed a happy spiritual company often going about the streets singing in processions. Nāmdev was born in a tailor's family. It is said that in his early youth he took to the way of the robber and once killed some soldiers. Later on when he saw the sorrowing wife and the young child of one of those he had killed, his heart became repentant and he underwent a sudden conversion. He spent most of his time in the temple of Viṭhṭhala singing the Lord's praises. However, his rapid spiritual progress had made him a little vain. Then one day Jñāndev came to the temple with his brothers and sister, Muktābāi. The young girl detected the strain of vanity in Nāmdev and asked another saint, Gorā the potter, to test all the assembled holy men. Gorā took a stick and began tapping their heads one by one. When he came to Nāmdev he said that that 'pot' was unbaked — the only one in that group. Humiliated, Nāmdev was directed to go to Visobā Khechara who was himself a disciple of Jñāndev. After getting initiation from Visobā, he had to pass through intense spiritual struggles. His sorrow at not having realized God found expression in a number of *abhaṅgs* (lyrics). 'As a bee's heart might be set upon the fragrance of a flower, or as a fly might take resort to honey, similarly does my mind cling to God', says Nāmdev in one place. In another *abhaṅg* he says:

> I am called lordless, lordless; but Thou art called the Lord.
> I am called fallen, fallen; but Thou art called the reliever of the fallen.
> If Thou art not to listen to me, says Nāmdev,
> Would it not be a matter of shame to you?

Like other Maharashtra saints Nāmdev attached great importance to the repetition of the divine Name: 'God may remain concealed, but He cannot conceal His name. When we have once uttered His name, He cannot escape from us', so said Nāmdev. Through intense devotion and constant repetition of His name, Nāmdev was able to attain to the highest state of spiritual illumination. Though he was intensely devoted to Viṭhṭhala, his Chosen Deity, he experienced His immanence in all created things. The story is told that one day a dog ran away with a piece of dry bread, and Nāmdev ran after it with a pot of ghee in his hand shouting, 'O Lord, wait. Let me butter the bread.'

Nāmdev had a maid servant by name Janābāi. She was his disciple and served him with great devotion. She too was a poet of no mean order, and her simple *abhaṅgs* are still popular in Maharashtra. Janābāi used to get up early in the morning and grind corn in her hut, all the while singing praises of God. One day Nāmdev's mother heard her talking to somebody and peeped in. She saw another woman. On being questioned, Janābāi replied it was Viṭhṭhalbāi — God Viṭhṭhala in the guise of a woman! If god can assume the form of a man, can He not also come in the form of a woman? In one of her *abhangs* Janābāi speaks about grinding her *karma* in dispassion's mill which has faith for its handle. What an apt imagery! Her place among the Maharashtra women saints is next only to that of Muktābāi.

Another group of great saints appeared in Maharashtra in the sixteenth century. Among them the most famous was Eknāth. Born in a pious Brahmin family in Paithan, Eknāth was deeply devoted to God from his childhood. At the age of twelve he met his *guru,* the well-known Janardana Svāmin, and was initiated by him. He served his *guru* and studied under him. When he came of age he was married to a pious girl. He lived the life of an ideal householder. His duties of life were never an obstacle to his devotional life. He spent his time in meditation, scriptural study and teaching, devotional singing and service of the pious and the needy. A number of stories connected with his life show his spirit of *ahiṁsā* and patience. Once when he was coming out of a river after his bath, a Mohammedan spat on his body. Eknāth calmly went back and took his bath again. The Mohammedan again spat on his body, and again Eknāth, without a word of anger, went and had his bath. The spitting and bathing went on 108 times until the repentant scoundrel fell at the saint's feet and begged his pardon.

Eknāth published for the first time a reliable edition of *Jñāneśvarī.* Among his own works his commentary on the eleventh chapter of the *Bhāgavatam* and the long poem entitled *The Marriage of Rukmiṇī* are famous. But his popularity among the masses rests mainly on his *abhaṅgs* (lyrics) in which he expresses his intense devotion to God, and sense of moral values: 'We should live in the world as mere pilgrims who come to a resort in the evening and depart the next morning. As children build houses in sport and throw them away, so we should deal with this life.' About spiritual practice he says, '*Bhakti* is the root, dispassion is the flower and illumination is the fruit.' In some other *abhaṅgs* he speaks of his spiritual experiences which were of the highest order. 'At the dawn of mystical experience I saw the whole world clothed in radiance', he says in one place. In one of his most popular songs he says that inside and outside, in sleep and in waking, in whichever direction he looked he saw only Rāma. Some other *abhaṅgs* describe his attaining oneness with God. Eknāth made the sublime teachings of Vedānta popular among the masses of Maharashtra.

In the seventeenth century there appeared in Maharashtra another great saint, Tukārām, the most popular of Maharashtra saints. His life is a favourite topic for the form of musical discourse known as *Harikatha,* perhaps because the unpleasant domestic scenes created by his nagging wife provide ample scope for dramatizing the life of the pious householder. He was born in 1608 at Dehu, a village about eighteen miles from Poona, in a pious family of farmers. When he was a young man, there raged a great famine in that part of the country and Tukārām lost his cattle, land, one of his two wives and also a son. The surviving wife was a shrew and made his life miserable by constant nagging. All these unpleasant experiences turned his mind towards God. He began to study the works of Jñāneśvar, Nāmdev and Eknāth, and spent his spare time in contemplation in the wilderness. He was initiated in a dream by a saint known as Bābājī whom he refers to in one of his *abhaṅgs* as the 'Ship of Pāṇḍuraṅga' which can take people across the ocean of worldly existence.

After a period of *sādhanā* in seclusion Tukārām emerged as a poet and preacher. This aroused the jealousy of the Brahmins of the locality who tried to persecute him in many ways. But in the end his intense love for God, and blameless life won them over to his side. His *abhaṅgs* reveal the great inner struggles he had to pass through in order to attain full illumination. They express his intense yearning for God.

It is significant that the life of a sincere aspirant always begins with a sense of misery and dissatisfaction and this makes him turn to God. After he has undergone a few months or years of struggle, the Lord makes His presence felt to him and gives him an amount of joy, and then disappears. This separation of the soul from the Divine gives rise to intense sufferings — not of the worldly kind but of a higher type. The Christian mystics call it the 'Dark Night of the Soul'. The

Hindu mystics call it *viraha.* It is as if a cloud has descended on his soul and the aspirant is assailed by many temptations of a subtle kind. Tukārām expresses this condition in one of his *abhaṅgs* as follows:

How can I know the right —
  So helpless am I —
Since thou thy face hast hid from me,
  O thou most high!

I call and call again
  At thy high gate.
None hears me; empty is the house
  And desolate . . .[5]

He goes to the Lord as a beggar for alms. What alms? The alms of divine Love.

A beggar at thy door,
  Pleading I stand;
Give me an alms, O God,
  Love from thy loving hand.

Spare me the barren task,
  To come, and come for nought.
A gift poor Tukā craves,
  Unmerited, unbought.[6]

The intense agony of separation from God finds poignant expression in his following well-known *abhaṅg*:

As on the bank the poor fish lies
  And gasps and writhes in pain,
Or as a man with anxious eyes
  Seeks hidden gold in vain —
So is my heart distressed and cries
  To come to thee again.

Thou knowest Lord, the agony
  Of the lost infant's wail,
Yearning his mother's face to see.
  (How oft I tell this tale!)

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[5] Quoted from Nicol Macnicol, *Psalms of Maratha Saints,* The Heritage of India Series (Calcutta: Association Press), p. 56.

[6] ibid., p. 57

Oh at thy feet the mystery
  Of the dark world unveil!

The fire of this harassing thought
  Upon my bosom preys.
Why is it I am thus forgot?
  (Oh, who can know thy ways?)
Nay, Lord, thou seest my hapless lot;
  Have mercy, Tukā says.[7]

Tukārām wanted to taste sugar, he did not want to 'become' sugar. He wanted to enjoy the bliss of communion with God, he did not want to become one with Him. He therefore says, 'Advaita contents me not.'[8] The attainment of inner purity and complete self-surrender enabled Tukārām to be blessed with the divine Vision, to feel the blessed presence of his Lord. The Lord Pāṇḍuraṅga must have appeared to him in his Vision. For he says: 'See, Tukā says, mine eyes behold him now, standing all wrapt in thought.'[9] He felt the constant presence of the Lord in him, as he tells us in the following *abhaṅg*:

Now Pāṇḍuraṅg I've chosen for my part,
  None, none but His to be.
In all my thoughts He dwells, dwells in my heart,
  Sleeping and waking He.[10]

He felt that the Lord was constantly guiding him everywhere, for his will had merged with the divine Will:

Holding my hand thou leadest me,
  My comrade everywhere
As I go on and lean to thee,
  My burden thou dost bear . . .

So like a happy child I play
  In thy dear world, O God,
And everywhere — I, Tukā, say —
  Thy bliss is spread abroad.[11]

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[7] ibid., p. 63
[8] ibid., p. 68
[9] ibid., p. 70
[10] ibid., p. 70
[11] ibid., p. 71

He could now say with confidence, with the conviction born of direct realization:

God is ours, yea, ours is He,
Soul of all the souls that be.

God is nigh without a doubt,
Nigh to all, within, without.

God is gracious, gracious still;
Every longing He'll fulfil.

God protects, protects His own;
Strife and death He casteth down.

Kind is God, ah, kind indeed;
Tukā He will guard and lead.[12]

In another *abhaṅg* Tukārām speaks about the transcendent nature of God which could only be grasped through *bhakti:*

Thy nature is beyond the grasp
  Of human speech or thought.
So love I've made the measure-rod,
  By which I can be taught.

Thus with the measure-rod of love
  I mete the infinite.
In sooth, to measure Him there is
  None other means so fit.[13]

Through intense love for God Tukārām attained freedom from the clutches of the senses and the mind. So he says in a tone of triumph:

Beat we the drum of Love, whose din
Brings terror to this age of sin.
Hail, Tukā bids, with joy the victory we win.[14]

True victory is conquering one's passions; it means conquest of oneself. The Upaniṣad speaks about it as *svarāṭ,* Self-sovereignty, true freedom born of Self-realization. It is a strange fact, a paradox, that we win true freedom by losing ourselves, by sacrificing our lower self or ego. We lose our ego and gain the Lord. So Tukārām says:

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[12] ibid., p. 73

[13] ibid., p. 73

[14] ibid., p. 85

> The self within me now is dead,
> And thou enthroned in its stead.
> Yea, this I, Tukā, testify,
> No longer now is 'me' or 'my'.[15]

In another beautiful *abhang* he says:

> Before my eyes my dead self lies;
> Oh, bliss beyond compare!
> Joy fills the worlds, and I rejoice,
> The soul of all things there.
>
> My selfish bonds are loosed, and now
> I reach forth far and free.
> Gone is the soil of birth and death,
> The petty sense of 'me'.
>
> Nārāyaṇ's grace gave me this place,
> Where I in faith abide.
> Now Tukā says, my task I've done
> And spread the message wide.[16]

Let us learn how to live this spiritual life, and let us know in our heart of hearts that the greatest of all spiritual practices is self-surrender, complete dedication of ourselves to the supreme Spirit. Let us learn the secret of this self-surrender and self-dedication from the saints of Maharashtra. Indeed, that is the eternal message of all great saints.

Saints of North India

The first great saint who inaugurated the *bhakti* movement in North India in the thirteenth century, as a reaction to the political conquest of India by the Muslims, was Rāmānanda. He was born in Allahabad but his ancestors had come from South India. He was a child prodigy and mastered the scriptures at an early age. He joined the Śri Vaiṣṇava order of monks and became a disciple of Rāghavānanda, a well-known leader of that order. He went on a pilgrimage that took him all over South India. On his return, the Vaiṣṇava monks under Rāghavānanda refused to admit him into their fold as they thought that he could not have adhered to the strict rules of the order, especially those regarding food, during his travels. This was a rude shock to Rāmānanda who thenceforth led an independent life and became more liberal in his views about caste etc. In fact, the most famous saying ascribed to him is: 'Let no one ask a man's caste or with whom he eats. If a man is devoted to Hari, he becomes Hari's own.' [17]

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[15] ibid., p. 79

[16] ibid., pp. 79-80

He lived in a hut on the banks of the Gaṅgā at Banaras and practised intense austerities and meditation. Four times a day he came out of his hut and blew a conch-shell. For the Hindu religious culture of North India, which was then facing the challenge of Islamic supremacy, the clarion call of Rāmānanda came as a new message of hope. Disciples began to come to him from far and near. They included Hindus and Muslims, and among them were the great saints Kabīr, Ravidās and Dhannā, and several women. Rāmānanda identified Rāma with the supreme Spirit and looked upon humanity as one family. He gave up the distinctions of caste and religion, and paved the way for a unique blending of Hindu and Islamic piety in India in the later centuries. He did vigorous preaching but only very few of his poems or other literary works have survived. A single poem of his is recorded in the *Granth Sāhib* of Sikhs, and it reveals the breadth of his vision:

> Where shall I go? The music and the festivity are in my own house, my heart does not wish to move, my mind has folded its wings and is still. One day, my heart was filled to overflowing, and I had an inclination to go with sandal and other perfumes to offer my worship to Brahman. But the *guru* revealed that Brahman was in my own heart. Wherever I go, I see only water and stones (worshipped); but it is Thou who hast filled them all with Thy presence. They all seek Thee in vain among the

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[17] जाति पाँति पूच्छै नहि कोई ।
हरि को भजे सो हरिका होई ॥

Quoted in *Rāmānand to Rām Tīrath* (Madras: G.A. Natesan and Co., 2nd edn.), p. 3

> Vedas. If Thou art not to be found here, we must go and see Thee there. My own true *Guru,* Thou hast put an end to all my failures and illusions. Blessed art Thou! Rāmānanda is lost in his Master, Brahman; it is the word of the *guru* that destroys all the million bonds of action.[18]

According to Dr. Grierson, Rāmānanda was born in A.D. 1299 and died in A.D. 1410. This would give him a life of 111 years. Though Rāmānanda was the fountain-head of the Hindu religious revival in North India, his message of simple devotion and social equality spread all over North India, mainly through the songs of Kabīr. There is much uncertainty regarding Kabīr's year of birth. However, his influence dominated the fifteenth century at a time when Hindus and Muslims were trying to get adjusted to each other's religious beliefs and practices. He was either a real or adopted son of Muslim parents who were weavers living in Banaras. These poor weavers had formerly been Hindus and had a low social status in the eyes of both Hindus and Muslims. Naturally, they were free from the burden of religious traditions and disciplines. Kabīr grew up in this unconventional society which influenced all his poems. He did not have a regular schooling or training in philosophy. He was married and had a son and a daughter. It is said that his domestic life, like that of Tukārām, was not a happy one. He earned his livelihood by weaving, and composed his poems while plying the shuttle.

For a long time he did not have a *guru.* He had heard about Rāmānanda but was afraid that the great saint might not accept him as his disciple. So he hit upon a plan. He knew that Rāmānanda went for bath in the Gaṅgā every day very early in the morning. One day he went and lay down on one of the steps leading to the river. When the saint came, he did not notice the man in the darkness and his foot touched his body. Taken aback, Rāmānanda exclaimed, 'Rām, Rām'. Immediately Kabīr stood up and with folded palms addressed the saint: 'Master, you have given me the *mantra* and thereby have made me your disciple, even though I am only a poor Muslim weaver.'

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[18] Quoted in *The Cultural Heritage of India,* Vol. IV (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1969), p. 379

Deeply moved by the man's devotion and humility, Rāmānanda accepted him as his disciple and revealed to him the secrets of spiritual life.

Thenceforth Kabīr led a God-intoxicated life. The normal duties of life did not prevent him from constantly singing God's praise and remembering Him. He had to pass through the anguish of waiting for God's vision which all the great mystics had experienced, but in the end he attained illumination. He had Muslims and Hindus among his large following. His unconventional ways, his preaching of God to all people alike, and his criticism of the superficialities and religiosity of *purohits* and Mullahs enraged the orthodox Hindus and Muslims alike. He was persecuted and finally banished from Banaras. The rest of his life was spent, it is said, in wandering from place to place along with his followers. He lived upto a ripe old age. According to a legend, after his death his Hindu and Muslim followers quarrelled about how to dispose of the body, but when they lifted the shroud, found only a heap of flowers beneath.

Kabīr's songs have a strong moralizing vein in them. He stressed simplicity of life, manual labour, equality of man; and he condemned religious bigotry in no uncertain terms. Like his *guru,* Rāmānanda, he laid great stress on the chanting of the Name which he indentified with God Himself. God for him was the all-pervading supreme Spirit who is immanent in all beings and transcends all forms. At the same time, God is the soul's eternal Beloved, who can be known only through pure love for Him. He had no use for rituals and philosophical doctrines. For him Rām and Rahīm referred to the same supreme Spirit. He condemned the blind worship of images in temples and the superficial devotions in mosques. What everyone ought to do was to seek Him in the depths of his heart. One of his poems says:

> If God dwell only in the mosque, to whom belongeth the rest
> of the country?
> They who are called Hindus say that God dwelleth in an idol;
> I see not truth in either sect.
> O God, whether Allāh or Rām, I live by Thy name,

O Lord, show kindness unto me.
Hari dwelleth in the south, Allāh hath his place in the west.
Search in thy heart, search in the heart of hearts;
there is His place and abode.[19]

Kabīr laid great stress on the constant remembrance of the Divine. In the following poem we get an idea of his *sādhanā* and realization:

O Sādhu! the simple union is best.
Since the day when I met my Lord, there has been no end to the sport of our love.
I shut not my eyes, I close not my ears, I do not mortify my body;
I see with eyes open and smile, and behold His beauty everywhere.
I utter His name, and whatever I see reminds me of Him; whatever I do, it becomes His worship.
The rising and the setting are one to me; all contradictions are solved; wherever I go, I move round Him, all I achieve is His service.
When I lie down, I lie prostrate at His feet.
He is the only adorable One to me; I have none other.
My tongue has left off impure words, it sings His glory day and night.
Whether I rise or sit down, I can never forget Him for the rhythm of His music beats in my ears.
Kabīr says: 'My heart is frenzied, and I disclose in my soul what is hidden. I am immersed in that One great Bliss which transcends all pleasure and pain.' [20]

The songs of Kabīr spread among the masses and enabled them to grasp the essentials of true spiritual life. His own simple and God-intoxicated life became an ideal for thousands of people. In him the Hindus and Muslims found a common meeting point. His poems profoundly influenced the social outlook and religious beliefs of the people of the entire North India. How deep and wide that influence is can be understood only when you go to South India where you meet with a different cultural pattern and social attitude.

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[19] Quoted in *Rāmānand to Rām Tīrath,* op. cit., p. 18

[20] ibid., pp. 26-27

Another great disciple of Rāmānanda and a senior contemporary of Kabīr was Ravi Dās (or Rāidās), the cobbler saint of Banaras. Like Kabīr, he too led a householder's life and earned his livelihood by manual labour — making shoes, which is considered one of the lowliest professions in Hindu society. Unlike Kabīr's, his domestic life was peaceful and his verses do not show any harsh criticisms. His songs reveal a highly refined mind, always immersed in the love of God. Though a poor cobbler, the reputation of his sainthood spread far and wide, and he had a large following. His life and teachings are a source of inspiration to millions of people in North India, especially among the poor and the so-called low-caste people. His followers form a separate Vaiṣṇava sect in North India, known as *Rāi-Dāsīs,* and are numerically next only to *Rāmānandīs* (followers of Rāmānanda) and *Kabīrpanthīs* (followers of Kabīr).

The next great saint of North India who belonged to the same religious temperament as Rāmānanda and Kabīr was Nānak (1469-1538), the founder of the Sikh religion. He was born in a village near Lahore in the Punjab in a Khatri (Kṣatriya) family. His father was the accountant of the village, and also a farmer. Early in boyhood he was sent to school where he acquired a good knowledge of Hindi and his own native dialect and also the Persian language. Even from childhood days he showed a deep religious temperament and practised meditation. Noticing his other-worldly tendency, his father made him look after the cultivation of his land and also attend to a little trade. But Nānak's whole heart was set on matters spiritual and, in spite of his father's directions to the contrary, he began to devote more time in contemplation.

When he came of age he was married and had two children. But he paid little attention to household duties and spent his time in the woods and lonely places. His relatives got him a job under the Muslim Governor of the district. His inseparable Muslim companion Mardana, joined him there to serve him. Along with a few others these two used to spend their spare time in *bhajan.* Finally Nānak renounced the world, distributed his wealth among the poor and, accompanied by

Mardana, began to wander all over North India practising contemplation in solitude and meeting holy men. He might have been much influenced by the poems of Kabīr and also the new religious awakening in South India. It is said that Nānak even visited Mecca and had discussions with the Muslim divines of Arab countries. After a long absence of twelve years he returned to the Punjab. It was then that the great Mughal conqueror Bābar invaded India. Tradition says that Nānak influenced the emperor much in treating his prisoners with kindness.

Towards the close of his life Nānak gave up the garb of the ascetic and lived with his family. The fame of his holiness spread in the neighbourhood and people flocked to see him and attend his group prayers. The offerings that they brought were spent in the service of the poor. Like Kabīr, Nānak preached belief in one non-anthropomorphic but Personal God whom he called Hari. Like him, again, he gave greater importance to purity of heart than to the knowledge of the scriptures. Both condemned caste restrictions and exhorted people to lead a simple life. Nānak gave great importance to the repetition of the divine Name. In his old age he wrote a long poem called the *Japjī* which every pious Sikh recites at daybreak. A few lines from it are given below:

Of Him, the One True name is *Om*
  Creator, all-pervading He:
Devoid of hate and fear, unborn,
  Undying, self-existent Lord . . .

True is the Lord, true is His name,
  If uttered with endless love;
Unceasingly men ask from Him,
  And from His hands, receive rich gifts.

What shall we offer in return
  That we may in His Presence stand?
What shall we utter with our lips
  Which, hearing, He may love us well? . . .

O Nānak, He is realized
  Only through His own Grace divine

Who boast of other ways and means
They idle prattlers are and false.[21]

There is another beautiful song of Nānak which Swami Vivekananda used to sing before his Master, Sri Ramakrishna. The story goes that when Nānak wanted to enter the temple of Jagannāth at Pūri in order to witness the *ārati* (waving of lights before the Deity), the priests did not allow him to do it. So he sat outside the temple and composed the following song:

Upon the tray of the sky blaze bright
The lamps of sun and moon;
Like diamonds shine the glittering stars
To deck Thy wondrous form.
The sweet Malaya breeze blows soft,
For fragrant incense smoke;
The moving air sways to and fro
The fan before Thy holy face;
Like gleaming votive lights
The fresh and flowery groves appear.

How wonderful Thy worship is,
O Slayer of birth and death!
The sacred *Om,* from space arisen,
Is the resounding drum.
My mind craves nectar day and night
At Hari's Lotus Feet;
Oh, shower the waters of Thy grace
On thirsty Nānak, blessed Lord;
And may Thy hallowed name
Become His everlasting home![22]

Nānak lived and died as a great Hindu saint. But soon after his death, his followers, under the leadership of the Sikh *gurus,* separated themselves from the Hindu fold and started a new religion known as Sikhism. Nānak's influence has been a living force in the Punjab and the bordering states of India even to this day.

We now come to the great saint of the sixteenth century,

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[21] ibid., pp. 48-51

[22] See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 133.

Tulsīdās, whose work, the *Rāmcaritamānas,* is the most popular and influential book in the whole of North and Central India. There is hardly a home in this part of the country which does not preserve a copy of this great work. For the last three hundred years it has shaped the moral and spiritual lives of millions and millions of people in India. It is a common sight all over North India to see groups of people listening in rapt attention to the exposition of this book by village teachers or wandering *sādhus.*

Tulsīdās was born in A.D. 1532 in a Brahmin family in an obscure village in Uttar Pradesh. It is said that the boy uttered the name 'Rāma' as soon as he was born. Considering this as an ill omen, the ignorant parents abandoned the boy! He was then picked up by a saint named Naraharidās at the command of the Lord Himself. Later, Tulsī paid his heart's tribute to this *guru* and foster-parent:

> I salute the lotus feet of my *guru*
> The ocean of compassion, and Hari (God)
>   in the form of *nara* (man)
> Whose words like rays of the sun
> Dispel the heavy darkness of overpowering delusion.

He studied under another *sādhu* — Śeṣa Sanātana — for fifteen years mastering the Vedas and the Vedānta.

Tulsīdās married Ratnāvalī who bore him a son. He was passionately fond of his wife. One day, on returning home, he found that she had left for her father's place. Pining for her, he followed her to his father-in-law's place, though uninvited. When he met her there, she was annoyed at his unbecoming attachment and said: 'Great is your love for this body of mine composed of bones and flesh. Had you offered half of that love to Rāma, you would have been spared from worldly troubles and attained salvation.' These sharp but wise words brought a new light to Tulsīdās. It awakened him to the unreality of the world and worldly relations and also to the reality of the supreme Spirit manifest as Śri Rāma. The result was that he renounced the world, and after having finished his pilgrimage to the four great holy places — Rāmeśvar, Dvārka, Pūri and Badarikāśrama, he settled down at Vārāṇasī (Banaras).

He undertook some more short pilgrimages now and then but would always return to Vārāṇasī. Now, at Vārāṇasī, his whole soul was drawn to Śri Rāma and longed for His vision. It is said that through the grace of the great Rāma-*bhakta,* Hanumān, he was blessed with several visions of the Beloved of his heart. Once the Lord appeared to Tulsīdās on horseback as a prince. It is said that at the blessed vision he lost all consciousness of the outer world and remained in the ecstatic state for three days. At another time he saw the charming form of the prince, sporting on the banks of the river Sarayū, with his companions.

At Brindāvan, learning that Tulsīdās was a devotee of Śri Rāma, a bigoted worshipper of Śri Kṛṣṇa told him: 'The Kṛṣṇa *avatāra* is the greatest; Rāma is only a partial incarnation.' Hearing this, Tulsīdās replied in his inimitable way: 'My soul was full of love only for the son of Daśaratha, and I admired his incomparable beauty. Now that you tell me of His divinity, my love is increased twentyfold.'

The Lord made Tulsīdās an instrument for the spread of Rāma-*bhakti.* In due course, he realized that he who was born as the son of King Daśaratha was none other than the supreme Spirit. His divine realizations filled him with love and sympathy for his fellow-beings and he was eager to share with all the blessings he himself received. We find evidence of this not only in certain incidents relating to his life but specially in his works, including his immortal *Rāmcaritamānas.* The very circumstances leading to the composition of his second best work, *Vinayapatrikā,* reveal his great heart overflowing with divine love.

Once a murderer came on a pilgrimage to Vārāṇasī and cried: 'For the love of Rāma, give alms to me a murderer.' Hearing the name of his beloved Rāma, Tulsīdās called the man to his house and gave him consecrated food, and declared him purified. The orthodox Brahmins of the place questioned him as to how the murderer's sin was absolved. Tulsīdās replied: 'Read your own scriptures and learn about the power of the divine Name.' The Brahmins were not satisfied. They asked for a further proof. They all agreed that if the sacred bull of the Viśvanātha temple would eat from the hands of the murderer, they would accept Tulsīdās' words. The man was taken to the temple and the bull did eat from his hands. Tulsī proved that sincere repentance made by a devotee is accepted by the Lord. A new trouble, however, arose. Kali — the embodiment of evil — threatened to devour Tulsīdās. Tulsī prayed to Hanumān who appeared to him in a dream and advised him to file a petition to Śrī Rāma — the Lord of the universe — for remedying the evil and that was the origin of the *Vinayapatrikā.*

Following in the footsteps of his predecessor Rāmānanda, Tulsīdās also wrote his works in Hindi, for the benefit of the masses. This drew the criticism of the Sanskrit scholars. One day a Pundit who was proud of his knowledge of Sanskrit, came to him and asked: 'Sir, you are learned in Sanskrit. Why then do you compose an epic poem in the vulgar tongue?' Tulsīdās replied: 'My language in the vernacular tongue is imperfect but it is better than the *nāyikā-varṇana* (the amorous descriptions of heroines) of your Sanskrit-loving Pundits.' The Pundit asked for clarification. Tulsī replied: 'If you find a jewelled vessel full of poison and an earthenware full of ambrosia, which will you accept and which will you refuse?'

In his introduction to his famous *Rāmāyaṇa,* Tulsīdās vindicates his choice of Hindi:

> I am confident of one thing — that the good will be gratified to hear me though fools may laugh . . . If my homely speech and poor wit are fit subjects for laughter, let them laugh; it is no fault of mine. If they have no understanding of true devotion to the Lord, the tale will appear insipid, but to the true and pious worshippers of the Lord, the story of Raghuvīr will be sweet as honey.

Once some thieves broke into Tulsīdās' place and found there a guard in the form of a young man of dark complexion, with a bow and arrow in his hands. Wherever they moved, the watchman turned to them and threatened to punish them. They were terrified. Something more must have appeared to the thieves. At daybreak they came to Tulsīdās and asked: 'Sir, who is this dark-complexioned lad of yours?' On hearing this, Tulsīdās was deeply moved. He knew that the Lord Himself had appeared as the watchman. He gave away all he had to them. Now the thieves themselves, having received the vision of Rāma and the magnetic touch of Tulsīdās, became spiritually inclined. They received instructions from the saint and lived a pure life, devoting themselves to God.

Once Tulsīdās took shelter in a certain home. As he was doing his cooking, the lady of the house offered him some spices to which he replied that he had those things in his bag. Then she offered him some other things which also, he said, were there. On hearing this, the lady replied: 'Bābāji, you have so many things in your bag. Only you have no place in it for your devoted wife!' Who was the lady? She was none other than his wife whose words had changed the course of his life. She recognized him, although he could not, and considered her a stranger.

Various other incidents reveal how divine realization was the sole object of his life and how he wished others also to strive for the same, with all their body, mind and soul.

Emperor Jahāngīr was said to be an admirer of Tulsīdās. One day he offered to give the saint a heavy purse. Tulsīdās replied: 'One who wants to perform the Lord's devotion should never seek to accumulate riches. The contemplation of money and its attendant anxieties soil the mind and render it unfit for meditation on the Lord.'

On another occasion Jahāngīr observed: 'Swamiji, our minister Bīrbal is very wise.' Tulsīdās replied: 'That may be so. But if, while gifted with this valuable but transient body, he does not seek to realize God, then there is none more foolish than he. To be successful in repartee, as he is, is no sign of wisdom; wisdom consists in the realization of the Godhead.'

Mahārāja Mān Singh and his brother and other princes used to visit the poet and honour him greatly. Once a man asked the saint why such great people came to see him in those days, while in former days none came. Tulsī replied: 'Once I used to beg and could not get even a cracked cowrie in alms. Then no one wanted me. But Rāma, the cherisher of the poor, made me of great price. Previously I used to beg from door to door for alms. Now even kings worship my feet. Then it was without Rāma; now Rāma is my helper.'[23]

In his *Vinayapatrikā* Tulsīdās speaks of his awakening from the sleep of Māyā, and expresses his determination to live the spiritual life:

> Up-till now I have lost much and wasted life in idle pursuits.
> The grace of Lord Rāma has aroused me from sleep.
> Awakened now, I shall not allow myself to be victimized by Māyā (illusion).
> I have gained the grace of the Lord's name.
> I shall hold it fast to my bosom and not let it from me for a second.
> The beautiful form of the Lord I shall cherish in my mind.
> Long has this world mocked me, making me a slave of the senses. Now I shall have no more of it.
> I am now a bee at my Lord's Lotus Feet and shall not allow my mind to leave the enjoyment of their nectar for a moment.

In another remarkable prayer he expresses his great faith in the divine Name:

> O Lord, let anyone accept any *sādhanā*, he is free to follow its pursuit.
> But to me Your name is the granter of all boons — *karma, upāsanā, jñāna* —
> The various paths outlined in the Vedas for the emancipation of the soul — all are good.
> But I seek only one shelter and that is Your name, I seek nothing besides . . . .
>
> I have enjoyed the sweetness of Your name.
> It is the fulfiller of my wishes here and in the world to come . . .
>
> A man may have his affection riveted anywhere as also his faith,
> But I recognize my relationship with the Name — Rāma — it is my father and mother.
> I swear by Śaṁkara and state the truth without hiding it.
> That Tulsīdās sees all good accruing to him only by repeating Your name.

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[23] Some of the incidents and songs have been taken from Bankey Behari, *The Minstrels of God* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan).

Tulsidās gives expression to pure devotion when he prays:

> O Lord, who is there besides You who will hear my cry?
> Strange is my petition — a poor man I, I seek to become a king . . .
> From time immemorial I have suffered the tortures of hell and have lived through many low births, but I crave not for wealth or even salvation though I know that You can confer all these.
> What I desire is to become in every birth a toy for You to play with or a stone to touch Your Feet.

We now come to Tulsīdās' famous *Rāmcaritamānas.* It is not just a translation of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* though it is based on that great work. It is more akin to *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* which is highly devotional in its trend. In the *Rāmcaritamānas,* Śiva himself narrates the story of Rāma to his consort Pārvatī. Mānasa Sarovar is a great lake in the region of Mt. Kailās, the abode of Śiva. Rāmcarita — the story of Rāma — is a lake conceived in the mind of Śiva. The lake at first remained hidden in the mind of Śiva until Pārvatī, through her question about the real nature of Rāma, made it flow for the good of mankind. Tulsīdās the author has embodied in his *Rāmāyaṇa,* besides the story of Rāma, translations of important texts of the Upaniṣads, the *Gītā,* the *Bhāgavatam* and other scriptures, thereby making the great truths hidden in Sanskrit available to the Hindi-knowing people — to the masses and the higher classes alike. Believed to be an incarnation of Valmīki, Tulsīdās surpasses Vālmīki at many places in the depth of true devotion and human touches.

Rāmcaritamānas begins with a dialogue between Śiva and Pārvatī. Pārvatī asks:

> O Lord, sages who are the knowers of Truth,
> Say that Rāma is Brahman without origin;
> Is he the same Rāma, who is the son of Daśaratha, the king of Ayodhya,
> Or is he some other unborn, unqualified, and indivisible Being?
> If he is the king's son how can he be Brahman?

Śiva replies:

> There is no difference between the qualified and the unqualified Brahman . . .

He who is unqualified, formless and invisible
Takes form through the love of his devotees.

To Tulsīdās, the supreme Spirit who took the form of Rāma, is manifest everywhere. In the Bālakāṇḍa he says:

Knowing all conscious and unconscious beings in the world
To be full of Rāma
With folded hands I salute the lotus feet of all.

Tulsīdās declares:

The Jīva is a part of God and is indestructible;
It is consciousness, pure, and blissful by nature.
It has fallen under the control of Māyā,
And is tied down like a parrot or a monkey.
The proud Jīva is under the control of Māyā
And Māyā, the repository of all qualities is controlled by God.

Which is the path that the Jīva should follow? Like a true devotee Tulsīdās has his preference for *bhakti*:

The path of knowledge is like the sharp edge of a sword.
One can fall from this path in the twinkling of an eye.
But ignorance, the root of the round of birth and death,
Is destroyed through *bhakti* without much effort.

The chief spiritual practice according to Tulsīdās is the repetition of the divine Name: 'The Lord's name — Rāma — fulfils all the desires and aspirations of the devotees in this Iron Age. It destroys the direst evil and turns poison into nectar.'

He says: 'I salute the name of Rāma . . . which is like Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, and the soul of the Vedas and without parallel.'

The final step in the path of *bhakti* is the soul's self-surrender to the supreme Spirit, the Soul of all souls. We ordinary people make the ego the centre of our life — thoughts and activities. The devotee, on the other hand makes God the centre. He offers himself — body, mind and soul — to the supreme Spirit. As the ego dies God reveals Himself and makes the devotee realize his eternal relation to Him. As a devotee he is the humble servant of the Lord, as a soul he is an eternal portion of the supreme Being. This is what exactly had happened to Tulsīdās, also. He realized that He who was the son of Daśaratha was none other than the Self of all beings.

Unlike the other great religious leaders like Rāmānanda, Kabīr or Nānak, Tulsīdās did not found a new sect. His greatest achievements were to project the personality of Śrī Rāma as the supreme Ideal, to infuse in the Hindus a new faith and optimism, and achieve the emotional integration of a nation which had been split into innumerable castes and weakened by repeated Mohammedan conquests.

In North India during the medieval period there were two streams of *bhakti* movement. One was centered around the worship of Rāma and the other was centered around the cult of Kṛṣṇa. The saints we have discussed so far belonged to the former group. The movement connected with the worship of Kṛṣṇa originated with the thirteenth-century Vaiṣṇava philosopher by name Nimbārka. But it gained strength and influence only with the coming of Vallabhācārya (A.D. 1479-1531) in the fifteenth century. Vallabha identified Kṛṣṇa with the supreme Spirit. His philosophy is called *Śuddhādvaita* because in it the Jīvas (souls) and the supreme Spirit are of the same nature and are identical, both are of the nature of pure *Sat* and *Cit* (Existence and Consciousness), the difference between the two being that in the Jīva the *ānanda* (bliss) aspect is concealed whereas it is fully manifest in the supreme Spirit. The Kṛṣṇa-centered religion of Vallabha spread after his death very rapidly in the western parts of India in all strata of society, especially among the merchants and the cultivators. At present it is the dominant faith in Gujarat and Rajasthan.

Two great saints who popularized the Kṛṣṇa cult and who were more or less contemporaries of Tulsīdās were Sūrdās (1479-1584) and Mīrābāi (1547-1614). Of these two, Sūrdās was said to be a disciple of Vallabhācārya. He was blind from birth and was ill-treated by his relatives. He started living alone in a hut in a village and earned his livelihood by predicting the future of people by his inborn power of intuition. He also somehow managed to learn Sanskrit. Later on, he shifted to Vraja, the land of Kṛṣṇa around Mathura (or Muttra) and spent the rest of his life there. He was a man of great renunciation and all his time was spent in the worship of Kṛṣṇa and in singing his praises. The collection of his soul-enthralling songs, about eight thousand of them, is called *Sūrsāgar* and reveals the hunger of his soul for God, his inner struggles and his intimate mystic experiences. These delightful songs are sung all over North India and for the worshippers of Kṛṣṇa these are a perennial source of inspiration.

The other saint Mīrābāi is the most famous of the women saints of India and can be ranked among the foremost of the mystics of the world. The normal place of women in India has from time immemorial been in the seclusion and sanctity of the home. The ideal of the vast majority of the Indian women has been Sītā and Sāvitrī — the epic characters who embody the virtues of self-sacrifice, patience and one-pointed devotion to their husbands. This ideal of the chaste wife (*pativratā*) has been further ennobled by its fusion with the mother ideal. As Sister Nivedita has pointed out, the Hindu woman as mother 'has been not only the lady and queen of her husband, but also the Goddess enthroned in her children's worship'. But quite distinct from this average run of women, there have been some outstanding characters who devoted themselves solely to spiritual practice and devotion to God without burdening themselves with the duties of family life. Some of them have left behind, as a treasure for posterity, wonderful hymns and songs about their spiritual struggles and experiences.

We have already discussed the lives of some of these women saints like Āṇḍāl, Akkamahādevī, etc. One important common point we find in all these devotees is that they looked upon the soul as the eternal bride and the Lord as the eternal Bridegroom, but we should always remember that this relationship had nothing to do with the body. There is a great similarity between the lives of Akkamahādevī and Mīrā, but if the former was like a running stream, the latter was like a river in flood. One great lesson we learn from the lives of these great women saints is that they all demonstrate the right and capacity of women to live the life of utmost renunciation and divine realization.

Many legends have gathered around the life of Mīrābāi, as in the case of most saints. But it is certain that she was a Rājput princess of the Rāthod clan. Even from her childhood she was passionately attached to Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the form of Giridhara Gopāla. When she grew up she was married to prince Bhoja Rāj, the eldest son of Rāṇā Saṅga of Chittor. But shortly after the marriage her husband and, sometime later, her father-in-law, died. One of her brothers-in-law became the Rāṇā (king). On the death of her earthly husband she refused to commit Satī, as she was wedded to her true spiritual husband, Lord Kṛṣṇa. The young princess spent her time in prayer and singing and dancing before the image of Kṛṣṇa installed in her private chapel. This attracted devotees and holy men and she was happy in their company. This was, of course, a disgrace to the royal household, and the Rāṇā tried several methods to persuade and persecute her so that she may give up her spiritual 'madness'.

Finally, unable to bear the sufferings, she left Chittor and went to her father's place. From there she went on a pilgrimage. After visiting Brindāvan, Mathura and other places where she met several well-known saints, she finally settled down at Dvāraka. It is said that in the end Mīrā got merged into the idol of Kṛṣṇa in the temple of Ranchod at Dvāraka.

The Lord made Mīrā an instrument for the propagation of the message of *bhakti*. The *bhakti* that she taught was of the highest kind. It meant superhuman renunciation, boundless love for and total surrender to the Lord. This was the great legacy that she left behind. Only a few rare souls can follow her example. About her own *sādhanā*, she speaks: 'Tears rear the creeper of Love on which, when it flowers, the Lord comes to play the *bhramara* (bee). . . .Mīrā says: "I discovered the great secret in uttering the Name and adhering to this quintessence of *śāstras*. I reached my Giridhar through prayers and tears." ' Her whole life was like a flooded river of love rushing towards the ocean of the Divine.

Perfect self-surrender is the culmination of spiritual life, and can be practised only by those who have greatly advanced in spiritual life. What then is Mīrā's message to the beginner?

She has given several helpful suggestions in some of her poems. The most popular of these is the one beginning with *sādhan karnā cāhire manvā bhajan karnā cāhī*, which means: 'O my mind, you must do spiritual practice and worship'. This is the central theme of spiritual life — to love and live for Him. Forms, rituals, etc. are secondary. In a sarcastic tone the great poetess-saint asks:

> If through daily bath one could attain Hari,
> then what about the aquatic animals?
> If by eating fruits and roots one could attain Hari,
> then what about bats and monkeys?
> If by worshipping the *tulasī* plant one could attain Hari,
> then I would worship the *tulasī* grove.
> If by worshipping stones one could attain Hari,
> then I would worship the mountain.
> If by drinking milk one could attain Hari,
> then what about the calves?

How then can one attain Hari? Mīrā says, '*binā prem se nahīn mile Nandalāla*, without pure love the darling son of Nanda cannot be attained.' Let us always remember this message of this great saint. We have to do spiritual practice; we have to sing the glories of the Lord; and all this is to be done with intense love and devotion.

North India produced during the medieval period a number of saints other than those we have mentioned above. Some among them were Muslim saints called Sufis. Among the Indian Sufi saints Shāh Latif of Sind, Dārā Shukoh (the eldest son of Emperor of Shahjehan) and Yārī Saheb of Delhi are famous. In those days many Hindus accepted Muslims as their *gurus*, and also many Muslim saints had Hindu *gurus*. As a result of this intermingling of Sufism and Hindu Yoga there arose a number of minor sects in North India which condemned caste system and image worship, and gave greater importance to purity of mind and *sādhanā* than to the study of scriptures. They all insisted on love of god and veneration of one's *guru*.

Saints of Bengal

The greatest medieval saint of Bengal was Śrī Caitanya (1485-1533) who is considered an *avatāra* (Incarnation) of

Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa by his followers. A brief sketch of his life has already been given in Chapter 33. His liberal attitude towards caste and his introduction of group singing (*kīrtana*) made the movement associated with his name extremely popular among the masses. Though Caitanya spent the last eighteen years of his life outside Bengal, at Puri, his followers and faithful companions, Nityānanda and Advaita Gosvāmī, carried on his work in Bengal with tremendous zeal. Caitanya also influenced two great Sanskrit scholars, Rūpa Gosvāmī and Sanātana Gosvāmī, to his way of life. These two brothers settled down at Brindāvan along with their nephew, Jīva Gosvāmī, and wrote a number of works in Sanskrit, thereby placing Caitanya's conception of *bhakti* on a philosophical basis. Owing to the efforts of these saints and their disciples, Brindāvan became the main centre of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism.

When we study the development of spiritual life in North India we find that Bengal is unique in one respect, and that is, the prevalence of Śakti worship there. Though Bengal was in close touch with the rest of North India, it was only in this part that Śakti worship became the dominant mode of religious life. Worship of Divine Mother no doubt is widely diffused all over India and its history goes back to antiquity. But, Śakti cult took deep roots and dominated the religious life of the people only in a few places: Kashmir at the extreme north, Kerala at the extreme south and Bengal and Assam at the extreme east. The principal scriptures of Śakti worship are known as the Tantras. Many of the authors of the well-known Tantras and their commentaries belonged to Bengal, and through the efforts of these scholars and adepts a special type of spiritual discipline known as Tāntric *sādhanā* became popular in Bengal. In the meantime a number of saints arose who not only made the worship of Durgā and Kālī popular but also gave it a higher spiritual turn. Two of the greatest of these saints in the eighteenth century were Rāmprasād and Kamalākānta whose poems were a source of great inspiration to Sri Ramakrishna. Rāmprasād was born in 1723 in a village on the banks of the Ganges, about thirty miles north of

Calcutta. He was a *vaidya* by caste and his father was an eminent physician. At school he gained proficiency in Sanskrit, Persian and Hindi. He was married at the age of twenty two and had four children. It is said that he was initiated by the great Tāntrika adept Āgamavāgīśa, and he began to spend his time in meditation. But when his father died he had to bear the burden of the family. He, therefore, went to Calcutta and became the accountant of a rich man by name Durgācharan Mitra. But Rāmprasād's mind was too busy with the thoughts about the Divine Mother to pay attention to accounts. He wrote poems about Her, as they came to him, on the pages of the account books. The matter finally reached the ears of the master who examined the books. But instead of feeling angry, he was deeply moved by the poems. He told the erring accountant that he would henceforth get a monthly allowance of thirty rupees for the support of his family and he could go home and continue his *sādhanā* without any worry.

Rāmprasād went back to his village, and gave his heart and soul to the worship of Kālī and intense meditation on Her. While engaged in *sādhanā*, songs would rise spontaneously within him, and these recorded the great spiritual struggles he had to undergo during this period. He had wonderful visions of the Divine Mother and his later life was immersed in higher spiritual consciousness. He died in the year 1803 on the day after Deepāvalī. When the image of Kālī was about to be immersed in water according to custom, Rāmprasād entered the river and gave up his body while singing praises to his beloved Mother.

The poems of Rāmprasād are sung all over the Bengali-speaking world. Their simplicity and intense spiritual fervour have made them very popular for the past two hundred years. As these poems record his own personal spiritual struggles and intimate experiences, they are a source of great inspiration to spiritual aspirants.

Every part of India has produced saints of great spiritual eminence. Through their lives, teachings and songs, and often through their organized followers, these great saints have made Hinduism a living faith adapted to the changing times.

Whenever and wherever the nation had to face the challenges of atheism or foreign aggression, saints arose and gave new directions to the spiritual energies of the Hindu race. Thus Hindu spirituality has been a dynamic force though branched into a number of sects and doctrines and practices. And beneath all this diversity, there has always run the basic continuity of Hindu culture, the chief characteristics of which are: man's quest for freedom from sorrow and ignorance, and the spirit of renunciation and tolerance. The central teaching of Hinduism is that total freedom from sorrow can be attained only through direct realization of God, that God can be attained through diverse paths, that there is an infinite variety of God-experience, and that the attainment of this is the goal of life. When we study the lives of saints belonging to other religions we come to the same conclusion. Indeed saints of all religions of the world belong to the same class. They speak the same truth though in different languages. All problems come when we fail to understand the languages used to convey their spiritual experiences. If we understand these symbols of spiritual expression, we will find that all the great saints speak about the same supreme Spirit who is the Soul of all souls, the source of all bliss and consciousness. Our task is to follow in the footprints that these great men have left on the sands of time and attain supreme bliss, knowledge and freedom.

PART IV

SPIRITUAL TITBITS

CHAPTER 35

SPIRITUAL TITBITS

In this world of phenomena there are no such things as perfect institutions since there are no perfect individuals. We have to accept things as they are. Both strong and weak points are to be found everywhere, and we have to choose that institution which has more good than bad and can help us also to improve ourselves.

Self-help is the best of all helps, but it need not be egocentric. Swami Brahmanandaji used to tell us, 'Let your mind be your *guru.*' This means that it should be pure enough to come in contact with the *Guru* of all *gurus*, dwelling within us. This is the best advice I can give. Do not weaken yourself by thinking that you are good for nothing. Instead of depending too much on any outside help, pray fervently to the *Guru* within for Light and guidance.

Learn to feel happy seeing others happy.

All of us have our weaknesses and strong points. Put both together, and as you look at them, you will find that good overweighs evil which, however, is to be removed in gradual stages.

When you feel depressed looking at your weaknesses, look back and notice what a great change has come over you in the course of the last few years. Let this fill you with hopes, and encourage you to try, try and try again. Knowing that the divine Power is behind you, you should learn to draw upon this Power through your earnest striving and prayer. I am sure that in due course you will find yourself spiritually transformed, more than you can dream of now.

Our ideal is so high that the more we proceed towards it, the more we find that there is yet so much to achieve. This is very good because it keeps us going and enables us to have a little taste of the divine joy as we continue to do our prayer and meditation.

* *

We must proceed towards the Truth. There are many approaches to It. The soul is following a certain trend of evolution, and sometimes it goes up and sometimes down, but the net result must be forward progress. There must be a system in our movement. Our ideas must be clear and systematized. They may be childlike at first, but they must not be hazy or indefinite. Our conception of the Divine must grow more and more as we proceed.

The first step is to find out where we stand. Find out your relation to God, the soul, and the universe. To begin with, let us stand where we are and perform our duties of life. Our concept of duty evolves as we evolve, but purity and devotion to God are fundamental. We must get a better conception of ourselves, of what we are and then think how to bring about a change in ourselves. Changes are seldom uniform. We have ups and downs, but we must be progressive, grow better. If we are dragged down, we must move upwards again. We have our moods. But we should have one dominant mood — the calm, spiritual mood. If we are angry we should at least not be angry with our whole mind. Keep at least a part of the mind under control. Learn how to remain unaffected. Maintain your mental balance. Can true religion bring this about?

In everyone there is restlessness for something higher, the hunger of the soul. The fact of 'soul hunger' is there deep below. Temporarily we may forget it, but again comes that yearning in the soul.

* * *

Three attitudes are possible towards ourselves: 1. I am the body, 2. I am the mind, and 3. I am the Spirit — the witness of my own thoughts. The first principle is that of self-consciousness: I *am*. Find out what this really means to you.

The mind is the instrument of the Spirit — our true Self. I see: but it is important to know how to see correctly. We often see in a wrong way, through coloured glasses. Latent impressions colour the mind. Make the mind less coloured. Try to see things as they are.

* * *

What is our relation to God? What we are concerned with now is the God who is in us. He is the thread connecting us all. We often forget this and get too self-conscious. We are like bubbles in the ocean, which have forgotten the common element. It is practical religion to find the link between God and ourselves.

Or imagine yourself as a point in a circle. There is no point where the circle does not exist. By this circle we are connected with one another and not directly. The idea is to look upon all with the same eye. Transmute personal life into higher life. But charity should begin at home. First of all establish a proper relationship with God who dwells within you. Relation to the cosmic Being never undergoes any change as relation to human beings does. Death is not destruction. It only means changing or shifting our place. The Self is something that never changes.

* * *

There is good and bad, and sometimes we catch a glimpse of the true Reality that is neither good nor bad. Good is what is helpful to spiritual life, bad is what is harmful to it. In us there are good elements and bad ones. Eliminate the bad ones and take the good ones, and then go beyond both good and bad. We can at least approach this ideal, and work our way towards perfection.

Do not get attached. Do not get upset. Try to see the Reality behind the phenomenon. We should be kind but not blind. Have infinite sympathy. Pain and sorrow are a kind of education; bear them. Turn to God even through suffering. Also hunger for Truth makes us turn to God.

We must be in tune with ourselves. If we are not in harmony, we prick others. Have harmony in mind and body. It is necessary to sublimate our feelings. If they are suppressed, they leak out again and again. Suppression or repression is not enough.

Friends have to some extent similar vibrations. Sympathize with angry people. Have sympathy from a higher plane. There are times when you are allowed to disagree with or scold others maintaining an amount of self-control. Then it won't lead to quarrels or misunderstandings. If we have inner harmony we induce harmony in others. If we are restless, we have both inner and outer troubles.

We must first of all come to have a spiritual attitude towards ourselves, and only then can we establish a proper relationship between us and the Divine and also with other people.

* * *

First we must be intellectually convinced. Then our conviction must be tested. Belief must be tested in our actions and thoughts. We must live up to it. There is too much talk about religion. The less we talk the better. Let us act. Let us live up to the ideal. Only a few can have real religion. There is too much theory. Practice is necessary.

Truth is one, but the approaches to it are many. From lower truths we step to higher truths. We must get glimpses of the Truth. There are steps which we can follow. Ideas must be assimilated and applied in life. Don't lower the ideal, rise up to it. We must approach it steadily, step by step. Get better and better, clearer and clearer ideas and conceptions. Proceed from the gross to the subtle and thence to the causal.

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To realize Him in us is the first step; then we realize Him in others also. Then comes a new outlook, a new sympathy. After the training of our faculties the will power becomes stronger. Feeling, willing and knowing must be co-ordinated, must be transcended through prayer, meditation, discharge of our duties, and self-control. Great energy is needed for spiritual life.

Men are of different types, but the goal is the same for all: to realize the soul's connection with the Divine, ending in the realization of their unity.

Selfless activity is a step towards the attainment of Divinity. If faith is added, it becomes easier. Noble sentiments have a great spiritual value. They take us nearer to God. In some, devotion is the dominant factor. But along with feeling there must be discrimination and right activity. Co-ordinate the different faculties. Rise above the faculties and know the Truth. May the Self inspire and guide us.

Our aim is to be free while living, to attain freedom before we die. We must do our best in this very life, as human birth is a rare privilege. Aspire to realize the Divine before death. Strive, proceed towards the goal. As long as we have our ego, the responsibility is ours. We must act and get nearer to perfection.

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Intuition is direct perception of the Truth. It is a faculty that expresses itself through the purified intellect and heart. Devotion must always be tempered by the intellect, feeling must always be guided by the intellect. Feeling and intellect should be co-ordinated, and we should never allow ourselves to be swept away by our feelings or mere intellectualism.

This higher faculty, intuition, leads us to direct vision, direct experience of the Truth. But, first, the power of intuition must be developed. This is a faculty which already exists in us but it is covered by the impurities of mind. Clean the mind in order to be able to perceive the Truth. We can at least get glimpses of the Truth. Vague intuition is to be developed into definite and clear intuition. Every soul is potentially Divine. Let us always remember our spiritual heritage.

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We must not allow ourselves to be swept away by our feelings. It is very dangerous. Clear, definite thinking is necessary. Control your moods. Good impulses from outside may be necessary in the beginning. But noble impulses from inside ourselves are more important. Have intense aspiration to see the Light in yourself. It is there in you. You have to manifest the inner Light.

There must be a balance in our inner and outer life.

Every work should be a service and a sanctified act.

There are two currents of thinking: the conscious and the subconscious. When you work, direct the conscious stream towards work and the subconscious towards God. When you are free, direct both to God.

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Our psycho-physical energy must be controlled and conserved. Energy is being wasted now. Don't waste energy. Physical and mental energy can be increased.

New channels can be opened that increase the flow of energy. Useless work, useless talks and gossiping and useless thinking are like weeds. Pull them out. Then there will be time for useful work.

During spiritual practice there must be no physical restlessness, no mental restlessness. Through practice concentration is deepened. Through concentration the channels of energy are cleared.

We must be in touch with the cosmic Energy. The task is, how to become better and less obstructed channels, that is, how to get more cosmic Energy. There is a lower mental energy and a higher mental energy or spiritual energy. Our ordinary thinking is done with the help of lower mental energy. For lack of exercise our higher faculties have become weak and hence spiritual energy is not received by us.

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Morning is the best time for worship, spiritual practices and meditation. Don't control the mind negatively; do it positively, by having good thoughts. It is necessary to have a central thought always.

What is the immediate goal? To get in touch with the Reality. Whatever we call real draws our whole being. So it is most essential for us to have a clear conception of what Reality is. The goal and the path must be real. Even our imaginations must be about the Real.

Control subconscious thinking and minimize it. We must know the laws of thought, and think and act consciously.

Reasoning is necessary. Through it we must go beyond it to the Truth which transcends it.

Concentration is achieved through practice. After meditation, at least a little of the mood is to be continued. A small light should be kept burning in the inner temple always.

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First see the Divine in Christ, in Buddha, etc. Then see Him in holy men. Salute the Divine even in those who are not holy, but always from a distance. We are too weak and might be affected if we move with them. Let us be on our guard. We must develop a sense of proportion and find out our own strength.

Always take proper precautions so that you are not affected by evil. We may temporarily run away. Is this weakness? We may form certain complexes in order to avoid worse complexes.

The mind is like a barometer. If you feel you are pulled down, be on the alert. Our life is very often a compromise, we can't help it. If we have full control over ourselves, we can avoid complexes. Often we must make use of a lesser evil to overcome the greater. Each is to be judged on its own merit.

Spiritual practice is like mental skating. The proud fall. Don't think you are too great or too safe.

In dealing with material things don't lose your inner alertness. There is a way of associating with people: have always an inner barrier as a shield when you come in touch with impure and evil-minded people.

Try to establish contact with the Divine, and through the Divine, with all. Let the point get its unity with the circle, and only then with the other points. The Divine is immanent in all beings just as the circle exists in each point. Through the whole, come in touch with all the parts.

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Most people neglect their duty towards the Divine. Most people cultivate weeds instead of good useful plants. We must thoroughly change our ways if we want to be spiritual. Entertain pure and noble thoughts, and try to be in tune with the Divine always.

We should try to make the spiritual mood natural to us. One portion of the mind at least should always be in that higher mood. Everyone must have a central thought. It may be the thought of your relationship with the Divine or the soul's longing for God, or the thought that you are the witnessing Self. Or repeat a holy Name always; the sound calls up the corresponding holy thought.

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Our task is to establish the contact between us and God. For this, introspection is needed. Spiritual practice develops the inner vision. We must find the centre of our consciousness. Every higher centre of consciousness brings us in touch with one aspect of the Divine, and this finally leads to the union between the individual and the supreme Spirit. The human being who realizes the Divine is the highest manifestation of God.

We should be primarily concerned with the practical aspect of religion. Religion loses its soul if it becomes only theoretical and does not solve the spiritual problems of man. It should teach us the spiritual science, the laws of the spiritual world. Know the nature of the microcosm, then you can know the nature of the macrocosm. In ourselves we find God.

The central idea is to find the One in the many, to recognize the ocean in the bubbles. The bubble must clearly know its bubble nature. Only then can it be pricked and made one with the ocean.

Some bubbles want to be in tune with the ocean directly, and do not care for even the mountain-high waves. Similarly, there are souls who want to be merged in the Infinite, and do not care to worship even the greatest teachers like Buddha and Christ. But most people need these outstanding personalities in order to reach the impersonal Spirit.

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Important factors before beginning spiritual practices are: A controlled life, diet, exercise, rhythmic breathing. As regards food, eat only what you can assimilate. Every aspirant must find out what is good for him. Exercise is necessary. Take care of your stomach and brain. Mental and physical disciplines are important. Follow the steps consciously, intelligently, not mechanically. Create the right mood. Give attention to your breathing. This in itself is a bit of concentration. When breath is controlled the mind will come back to itself.

* *

We must find within us a fixed centre of consciousness. This is an important point. The East has symbols which westerners often do not understand. There are seven centres of consciousness. You feel your stomach when you are hungry, your heart when you have emotions. Always try not to go below the heart, but to rise up to the forehead, the centre of intellect. For sentimentalists it is better to take the head as their centre of consciousness; for over-intellectuals, the heart. These centres are to be taken more in a psychical than in a physical sense.

Imagine the spinal cord with its nerve centre, like a staircase. The different thought planes are the different flats. The nerve current is flowing up and down. First fix your centre of consciousness. Feel an infinite space there of which your point of consciousness is the centre. Sometimes there is a downward pull; you move to lower centres. Learn the technique of controlling it. The point of control is in us, the centre of gravity is in us.

Imagine the Divine in the form of light, but not in terms of material light. Feel the centre of consciousness as luminous. One may take the help of symbols. Some imagination is to be allowed. Symbolic representations take us higher and nearer to the Truth. Imagine the luminous form of a Deity seated in the centre of your consciousness. Or imagine that you are a bird flying in the atmosphere of the Divine. This gives you a feeling of vastness. Or imagine the ocean and the bubble and their unity. The task of the bubble is to feel its unity with the ocean. The bubble can be pricked, and then it becomes one with the ocean.

Japa or repetition of some holy sound symbol and dwelling on its meaning is one of the most effective types of spiritual practice. It develops into meditation which means maintaining the same thought current without any break. This culminates in absorption in the Divine and finally in illumination and actual union between the soul and the Divine.

The aspirant must strive to attain harmony, rhythm, in mind and body. Different rules suit different people. But all must try to establish harmony between mind and body.

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We must establish a definite relationship with the Divine. He may be looked upon as the father, lord, mother, child or beloved; and also as the Soul of our souls. Our real soul is a spiritual entity distinct from the body and the mind. We must always try to think in terms of the Spirit.

Before meditation try to think of yourself as a part of the Divine, or as a child of God. Say, 'I am a spiritual entity.' Attune your will to the divine Will. We are beyond all sex in our essential divine nature. We are without any earthly relations which are always associated with the body. We are modes of God. God is a circle and we are like points.

Our love of God should not be negative, but should be positive and creative. Let us worship the Divine and serve the Divine, not only in the divine Forms, but also in all forms that manifest the Divine.

When we consider ourselves to be the children of the Divine, at first it is an imagination, later on it becomes true as an experience. The idea that we are parts of a Whole is, at the beginning of our spiritual life, only an imagination. It must be realized through spiritual practice and experience.

We must take a synthetic view of spiritual life. There are different paths to spiritual realization. Meditation is one, prayer is another, selfless service is yet another. Similarly the God of creation is one aspect, the God of preservation and destruction are other aspects.

Some are born with a natural inclination towards Monism. They do not want to remain as bubbles but want to become one with the ocean. If the aspirant approaches any of these aspects with sincerity, he will, by the grace of God, reach the Divine in all His aspects. Let the Divine speak to us directly. Direct knowledge is better than theoretical knowledge.

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Divine grace manifests itself through our striving. Through striving we reach God. When we attain Him, we get the highest knowledge and peace. 'Come to Me. I will give you illumination and bliss' — calls the Divine. Let us respond to the divine call.

There are two types of devotees:

1. The baby monkey type
2. The kitten type

The first type clings to the Mother; the second leaves everything to the Mother who does all that is necessary for the devotee. Some lay greater stress on striving, others on self-surrender. Again there are some who do not want to kneel before the Divine. They want to be one with Him by rising above all limitations.

The *bhakta* (devotee) thinks: I am Thine. The *jñānī* (philosopher) thinks: I am Thyself. Both have intense yearning for God, a deep thirst for the Infinite. Compare the two types. In the first case the devotee says: 'I am nothing, Thou art everything.' The philosopher says: 'I am not different from you.' He only denies his individual existence and thinks himself to be one with the Divine. In him the ego becomes extinct. On lower planes these two types differ somewhat widely; on the higher plane the difference is very little.

Let us strive our best and God will do the rest. Let us profit even by our mistakes. Blessed be the mistake if it makes us wiser. Sincerity will be rewarded. God looks at our sincerity.

* * *

In spiritual matters also there is the universal law of demand and supply. The Divine gives us what we need, not what we wish. God does not give us up, even if we do not care for Him. He waits for the opportunity to manifest Himself to us. This is God's grace.

Be sincere and leave the fruits of your striving to Him. Our sincere striving is more important than the results. If in an elevated moment we come in touch with the Divine, everything is found. We must try to realize the Divine through meditation, ethical culture, selfless service, etc. Do it as a form of duty. Read always some holy texts. The readings are to be looked upon as a part of our daily spiritual practice which is not complete without them. The duties of life must be fulfilled. Don't shirk them. They also form part of our spiritual practice; they are a kind of spiritual discipline. Every form of activity must be done as a form of service. Work then becomes worship. Say: 'Whatever I do is my worship to Thee, O Lord.'

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Try to give more time to your spiritual practices, and less time to useless talking, useless thinking and restlessness of the mind. Then you will do your meditation better, with greater intensity. You will also do your work in a more balanced way.

Some are too much engrossed in work. Some give themselves up to spiritual practice exclusively, but without success. Work and worship must go hand in hand. Don't shirk duty. Inner and outer life must be balanced. Transmute your work into worship; consecrate all work to God.

Adjustment is necessary in life. Always remember: we are all spiritual beings, spiritual entities dwelling in the body. The principal idea is: the body is an instrument, a temple, a sanctuary; we must use the body in a better way. It is to be looked upon as a house of God. There are two ways to moral progress:

1. Follow the ethical rules.
2. Change the outlook, and then it is easier to follow the rules. Do your duty in a better light.

We may temporarily retire from the world, even if this be a little selfish, and then return and meet others in a higher mood. You cannot serve unless you have collected something to give others.

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The meditative reading of a scriptural passage is needed every day at a set hour. This is just as important as the other practices. Similarly spiritual practice must be done at a fixed hour and never put aside. This means also the development of our will power. The purpose of all these is the conscious control of all our mental processes.

A conscious life is an interesting life. Most of us are half awake and half dreaming. Unconscious cerebration must become clear, definite thinking. Then alone is life worth living. Minimize your body consciousness.

Have mental freshness, always have the mind of a youngster. Be a child again. Be born a second time. It is imperative to have mental freshness. Cultivate it consciously. Try to be in tune with the Divine. The waters of life are flowing. Open the channels! Open the windows! Off with bad air! Let there be freshness within, always.

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Vedānta believes in the potential divinity of all souls. It does not believe in standardization of people. Every soul must be free to manifest its inherent divinity. Preserve your own ideas and try to assimilate the ideas of other religions. We Hindus believe in a change of the heart, purification of mind, but we are never satisfied until we are united with God. That is our creed, if you may call it so. Our creed is the creed of God.

True religion is the relation between the soul and God. Both religion and philosophy are necessary in spiritual life; the former spiritualizing speculation and the latter broadening religious outlook. Theory and practice must go hand in hand. In order to attain real peace we must combine religion and philosophy, faith and reason, intensity and extensity of outlook and vision. We must be deep as the ocean and high as the sky. Strict ethical discipline, scrupulous performance of duties and earnest spiritual culture are the means for the realization of God, the supreme Spirit who dwells in us. Keep your dogmas to yourself! Don't ask others to accept it! Outgrow your dogma! God is neither Christian, nor Hindu, nor Buddhist.

Sri Ramakrishna says: 'Know yourself and you come to know God.' Everybody is drawing the same water, the waters of life. God is everywhere. Seek God everywhere! God is seen as different Forms. He is all this and more. In the end He reveals Himself as He is. Take up any aspect of God. Follow any aspect. But remember that each divine Form is an uncommon point. We have to outgrow the uncommon points, and discover the circle, the all-pervading infinite Spirit. There is a law of growth. Follow it.

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Diverse are the ways to reach God. Follow the path, and then outgrow the creed and take up the creed of God. Our life should be expanded. Serve all, don't be self-centred. Expansion of heart — that is the test, the proof, of the growth of the soul. Our attitude towards others must be not of help, not of mercy, but of worship. Your helping others must be looked upon as a service to the Divine. Serve the God in man, serve the Divine in everyone.

Our motto must be: Let us first ourselves be divine in order to serve the Divine in others. We have to do this consciously and systematically. Work becomes a consecration if we know how to do it. 'Awake, arise, stop not till the goal is reached!' The more we advance, the more joy, peace and blessedness we find.

In our search for our true Self we come to God. The ego is then connected with God. When the ego is spiritualized, we are free. Instead of the idea of possession we have to take the view of trusteeship. Every connection through the Divine gives us strength. When we want to establish direct contact with people and things, there comes the trouble. See everybody and everything in and through the Divine. Or try to think that we are all servants of God, children of God.

* * *

It is difficult to find the necessary sense of proportion in dealing with others. Be strong so that others cannot take advantage of you. Don't be touchy, sensitive, nervous. The right perspective must be developed in every spiritual aspirant. Take things as calmly as possible. Try to see things as they are. Have adjustment for the sake of peace, and think that we have to deal with human personalities. We often prick others. Some people emanate good, calm, peaceful vibrations; others, bad vibrations and thoughts.

Try to be true to yourself and true to God, then it becomes easier to be true to others. Look upon God as the only Reality, and learn to look upon all others as depending on Him for their existence.

You must do what you ought to do under each circumstance. But don't be like weathercocks. Don't go on shifting your moods and attitudes. Don't allow yourself to be upset. Your life should be regulated by your ideals. Sometimes we try to lean on others too much; we look up to them too much. But human beings are such frail supports. Some people have their centre of gravity outside, instead of inside. Have your centre of gravity within you. The higher Self must be made the centre of your personality. But then there is a danger: we become self-centred, egocentric. So we must think that the Self is a part of God, the centre in us is the centre of a vast space. The point of contact with God is in ourselves. Hold on to your centre of consciousness but do not forget the infinite consciousness that extends all around it. Some are egocentric at first and then become cosmo-centric. At the beginning of spiritual practices some aspirants become self-centred for a time. Then they have to do some selfless work to counteract it. Meditation and prayer, when properly done, will also help us against becoming self-centred and selfish by enabling us to rise above our little self. We should never attempt to grow at the expense of others.

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Through gloom and darkness we reach the Light. As we progress, there will be less and less of darkness until at last we reach the Light. Even the great saints and mystics experienced periods of darkness and gloom. Higher thoughts must be our support during such periods.

We see others, but we don't see ourselves. This is our problem. In Vedānta it is said that we are the witnesses of our own thoughts. This attitude of the witness must be more and more developed and strengthened. Let us analyze ourselves as if we were a second person. Very often the witness is asleep. Wake him up! When a bad thought rises in you, detect it. Thoughts generally rise from the depths of our being, but they may also come through some outside stimulus. The food that we take through our senses must be pure. Be therefore always on your guard.

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At any moment, we should be fully prepared to give up our pet ideas if we find that they are not the Truth. We have to change our whole outlook if we want to grow. Before we die, we must achieve something substantially spiritual.

Who is there that is ready to pay a high price for spiritual freedom? We know the means, the spiritual techniques, and the great ones are ready to help us, but so perverse are we that we postpone our efforts and continue to derive intellectual enjoyment from some fine ideas without bothering to realize the Truth ourselves. We go on dreaming our miserable, contemptible, petty little dreams of love and greed and self-gratification, clinging on to them until they are torn away from our clutches.

After several years we ask ourselves: 'What have I achieved? What have I got out of this life?' We should all live in such a way that we get something concrete from our spiritual life. We should get at least some glimpses of the divine Light within us. No one who practises spiritual disciplines sincerely and methodically, leads a pure life, and prays to God intensely, will be disappointed. The world is a training ground and we should make the very best use of the short span of time given to us.

* * *

The worldly-minded and those who cling to their personal attachments alone are afraid of death. The spiritual-minded do not lose anything. For them death is like passing from a gross plane of existence to a subtler one. It is the body that dies. The Self never dies. Even if we fall in this battle of life, through newer and newer lives we shall work with renewed vigour. Step by step, stage by stage, we shall move onward until we attain life's final Goal.

On what does this whole life, our body and mind, depend? On consciousness, and not on any man form or woman form or child form.The moment the self leaves the body, the body becomes lifeless. All its charm vanishes. Nobody feels attracted to a dead body, even if it had once been beautiful. What really attracts us in the man-form or woman-form is the consciousness which we mistakenly identify with that particular body. If you love life so greatly, why don't you look for that on which depends life? We should learn to love the Self all the more because only owing to its presence is there any life in the body and the mind. But it takes people many, many years or even lives to see their mistake and realize the Truth.

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We can build up a strong thought wall around us, a bullet-proof screen for our protection from the influence of people around us. If our inner life is pure and strong, we get a strong thought wall. But this does not mean hatred of others and maladjustment in society. In spiritual life a great thing is to have a sense of proportion and adjustment. Adjust yourself nicely wherever you are without creating friction and misunderstanding. Create a nice atmosphere around you, which everybody should feel. In the devotee everything should be full of grace and dignity.

Disconnect yourself from your environment. Unless you put a hedge around you, you cannot grow. There are always hurricanes and cyclones of destruction. And goats too come and eat up the tender plant of spirituality.

Too much of precaution in the beginning may make your life look like a glass-case existence. You may not like this idea because you do not understand your own spiritual destiny. But this glass-case existence is necessary for all who really want to advance in spiritual life. After all, it is only a temporary state.

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Spiritual life has many phases and an endless variety of experiences. It is a real life of adventure and heroism and beauty, and whoever wants these should follow it without looking back, without caring either for life or death. There is much peace and bliss in store for you all if you would but follow the path conscientiously without wavering.

'But God has given us all these desires!' True, quite true, but He has also given us the desire for self-mastery. Sand and sugar have got mixed up in our case.

Why complain? We go and eat the fruits of the forbidden tree and lose the intuitive faculty which had begun to show itself in childhood. That is why we are in our present ignorant condition. It is not so much the fault of our environment. It is silly to complain about the evil in the world so long as we ourselves do not really change our ways — 'Oh, how wicked this world is! How bad men are! How criminal this is!' True, the world is bad, but then, what can you do about it? Rather, see that you transform your own life and become a blessing unto the world. One thing is true: no one who entertains hatred and dislike in his heart can see the Light of the Spirit.

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Our *karma* has to be worked out, and this means suffering and pain for us. But a true aspirant is glad that these come to him, for this always means that so much of his bad *karma* has been exhausted.

Learn to be real children of the Lord, no matter what happens, and pray to Him to give you unwavering faith in yourself and in the Divine. Make the Lord your all in all. Then nothing else matters any more. Then you are safe wherever you are. Be pure and have determined, one-pointed devotion to Him.

The greatness of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings is that he shows us how to realize the supreme Spirit step by step. He has shown us how to practise various types of *sādhanā*. But who wants to follow him? Who wants to live and act according to his advice? Who is willing to renounce his silly likes and dislikes, personal clinging to others, etc.? How many people do their spiritual practices, *japa* and meditation, steadily, energetically, intensely, day by day? Most people do not want to do all this, but they come and complain, 'Oh, I haven't attained anything in spite of all my efforts!'

Let us be up and doing. Let us strive to our utmost before this instrument of ours becomes too weak and decrepit. Boundless bliss is awaiting all who sincerely aspire after Truth and follow its dictates with one-pointedness.

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There is a subtle power behind all our sense organs and our organs of action. This power is circulating in the subtle body. Behind the subtle body is the causal body, also called the sheath of bliss. When your mind gets purified you can know the subtle powers working in you. Western psychologists see only the gross aspects of the mind and its material manifestations. They have no idea of the subtle powers working in and through the mind. I can feel all the different sheaths (the five *kośas*) quite distinctly.

A new instrument of spiritual vision, a new spiritual body, as it were, is formed in the course of one's spiritual practice, and through it one comes in touch with the highest Truth. A new mind, a new body, that are fit for spiritual vision, must be first developed and this is the meaning and purpose of *sādhanā*.

For this, the highest mental and physical purity is necessary. The purified mind becomes an instrument for the realization of the Personal God, the various Forms of the Divine. But in order to realize the Impersonal Absolute, one must transcend even the pure mind and body.

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Our true Self has, as it were, put on several garments. The trouble with us is that we go on thinking that we are the garments!

When you sit for meditation try to divest yourself of all these garments. Think of the infinite divine effulgence that fills your centre of consciousness, that fills all your centres — higher and lower — that which fills the whole universe. In that infinite Light merge your physical, mental and causal bodies. In this way the body is forgotten, only the spark that you *are* remains. Finally, let the spark also get merged in that infinite effulgence. If you can remain in that state, that will be real Vedāntic meditation.

By effulgence is meant not the physical light. But you must have that idea lest your mind should become a perfect blank, which is very dangerous for a beginner.

In order to strengthen the above meditation, now practise *japa* with intensity. Create, as it were, a luminous body, a holy spark, out of the infinite Effulgence, and dissolve it back into the Effulgence. You may also visualize, if you like, that your favourite divine Form is arising out of the infinite ocean of Light and merging back into It. Have this as an important part of your daily meditation. And after some practice you will find that all this takes just two minutes, not more.

Every day, before practising *japa*, make your mind pass through this process. If any thought or image arises in your mind, make it melt into the infinite Effulgence. Tell all those images and ideas, good and bad, that rise in you: 'Get merged in the ocean and be at rest! Or meditate with me, but don't trouble me any more!' Sometimes in our thoughts we quarrel with people. Better tell them, 'Get merged!' Realize your true nature!

* * *

Our human personality is so full of complexes, and we waste so much time turning round and round without ever moving forward. The energy that a whirlpool wastes in turning round and round in a single day would take it round the earth. In the same way, the energy we waste in turning round and round, refusing to become conscious, refusing to become free, could take us very far in our spiritual progress.

The spiritual current of the Divine is strong, but it cannot do anything so long as the whirlpool is still there. If you watch a river you can see it. There you have both the current and the whirlpool, but the current, however strong it may be, cannot efface a whirlpool that is created by an obstruction under the surface of the water. Our complexes act as obstructions which create the whirlpools that waste all our energy.

Our complexes colour everything that we see or experience. Everything is judged by the types of complexes we have within us. The more worldly we become, that is, the more we give expression to our desires and lusts, the more the complexes we form and the stronger the existing ones become.

As a result of thinking along a certain line we have brought about some mental and physiological habits. The harm that has thus been done has to be rectified. How to do this? By raising very intense counter-currents of thoughts. If this is done, our reactions will gradually change and our whole life will undergo a transformation.

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One concentrated, fully conscious, sincere utterance of the *mantra* is equivalent to hundreds of its absent-minded repetitions. Out of a thousand repetitions, only one may have been properly done. That is why you are asked to repeat the name of the Lord so many times.

People try to stimulate their nerves with the help of tea, coffee, etc. A reliable self-starter is always better. Most people want to be driven. They have become like motor-cars out of order!

Most of us are not conscious of our consciousness. Our so-called consciousness is mostly of a vague, diffused, unconscious variety. Our consciousness is all diffusing out through the senses. Stop this diffusion. Then focus it at one point. From that point, pass on to the circle.

Consciousness is the goal; it is an end in itself. The present range of our consciousness is very narrow; it has no depth; it is like a sheet of paper. We should increase our consciousness. We should first of all become *really* conscious. Only then comes the question of superconsciousness. The higher consciousness must be brought down into our everyday life. We must be able to maintain at least a little of it at all times. We should maintain a certain level of consciousness, below which the mind should not be allowed to fall.

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The fire of *kuṇḍalinī* when aroused can burn up our old impure personality along with the old *saṁskāras*. Sins are burnt up in that fire. A new luminous personality is created, as it were. The *kuṇḍalinī* can be quickly awakened through the efficient practice of *prāṇāyāma*. But in the case of beginners this is all dangerous. Awakening of the *kuṇḍalinī* must not be attempted until one attains great purity of mind, especially perfect chastity. Otherwise the awakened 'fire' will create trouble.

No one who constantly stimulates those centres in the brain which act on the sexual nerve centre in the body can ever think of leading spiritual life which in his case becomes a sham and counterfeit of the real thing. In modern life things are very often done to stimulate sexual desires — through cinema, literature, dancing, entertainment, conversation, drugs, intoxicants, etc. As long as a person does not realize the danger hidden in all these, he will not be able to lead a true spiritual life, neither can he call himself a follower of Christ, Buddha or Ramakrishna.

In the spiritual path there are more psychical difficulties than physical ones. *Japa* or the repetition of the divine Name, along with the thinking of the meaning or the Ideal it stands for, gradually removes the obstacles and makes the mind introspective and fit for meditation.

* * *

As children in the world of the Spirit, we are idolators to a degree. We cannot help worshipping a divine Form. We have to pass through this stage when we take forms to be real, but we must outgrow it. When our own forms are real to us, the holy Forms are also real, but we must outgrow both and try to see the Spirit at the back of all forms. We should try to see the same ocean at the back of all bubbles and waves, to see the One in the many. At the beginning of our spiritual life we may meditate on holy Forms, but we must pass to the Formless, the Principle behind the Personality.

* * *

Good and evil are equally real to us. We should try to do what is good and avoid what is evil. While doing so, we should think more of God — who transcends both relative good and evil — than of good and evil. Imagine a cloud which is thick at one part and thin at another. The thick cloud hides the light, while the other reflects it. The sun is beyond both darkness and reflected light. Similarly, God is both in the sinner and the good and also transcends both. In the sinner the divine Light lies hidden. In the good It is manifest. From the side of the cloud away from the sun, the light may or may not be seen. From the standpoint of the sun it is all light. It transcends both the reflected light and darkness.

The true devotee sees the will of God in everything. During Sri Ramakrishna's illness, when his disciples entreated him to pray to the Divine for his cure, he replied; 'How can I pray to be healed? My will has got merged with the divine Will. I have no will of my own.' In his vision he saw that he was eating through all mouths. He also saw that his body was suffering for the sins of others. The idea of atonement, suffering for the sake of others, was in Christ, and also in Sri Ramakrishna.

* * *

When we sit for meditation, everything is dark. There is opposition. Our mind revolts and wants to fly off at a tangent. We want some light, but we see nothing but darkness. This is the case in the beginning. More and more light will come when we go on steadily, regularly, with our practices. A good deal of mental drill is needed, but all this struggle on the lower plane is only for a time. When it is all dark, our discipline is to be continued with the greatest regularity and doggedness; then comes the sun. During dark periods, great stress on spiritual practices is necessary. Go on with your prayers, *japa* and meditation, even if they become a little mechanical. Generally, when difficulties arise people tend to give up their spiritual practice. They should do exactly the opposite.

We are swayed by these two: useless activity and lethargy. Both are equally bad and obstruct our progress. We are very rarely calm or balanced. Usually we are either asleep or aimless, or there is tremendous activity which increases our restlessness. Try to have *sattva*, rhythm, within you. Then you come to have a high mood. Sometimes we find that without any effort we are balanced, rhythmical, poised — everything becomes wonderfully clear to us; but a moment later our whole mood changes. This higher state is to be made steady. We must be able to bring about the higher mood consciously, with an effort of the will, by raising the centre of our consciousness. At present we do not know how to keep it, if we ever get it. It comes and goes, but we are not able to control it. This state of affairs must change. We must know how to culture the spiritual mood at any time.

* * *

Don't put your heart on the results. The *Gītā* says, 'You have the right to work, but not to the fruits of your work.' If you go on steadily and regularly with your daily practices and studies, fulfilling the necessary conditions, results are achieved automatically in the end. But there should never be any break in your practices because a very strong habit must be formed, and for most people it becomes very difficult to take up the practices and studies again, once their continuity has been broken. They should never be done in a haphazard, superficial way.

Self-surrender plays a very important part in spiritual life, but, is real self-surrender an easy affair? Let us rise above our little self and try to be in tune with the Infinite in us.

Even in spiritual life there are cosmic movements. A will that is greater than ours causes spiritual persons to find one another. There is the law of demand and supply in the spiritual world also. The movements are always up and down. There are different planes of thought, higher and lower. It is the grace of God that puts us in touch with the higher spiritual currents. Throw yourself into the stream and you will progress. Strive, and you will make wonderful progress. If I allow myself to be carried along by the current, well and good; but if I do some swimming of my own at the same time, I advance all the more quickly.

Take the early morning for yourself. Spiritual practice increases your efficiency and helps work too. Maintain the inner balance with an effort of the will. The capacity to work grows through concentration.

If we want to be of service to others, we must ourselves undergo training. We should ourselves manifest the divinity in us before we can arouse it in others. To the extent we help ourselves, to that extent we can help others. Can you swim? If you want to save others from drowning, you must know how to swim. Otherwise you get drowned along with others. Of course, swimming cannot be learned on land!

* * *

Spiritual power is latent in all human beings. Human birth is a very rare privilege, for only man has the possibility of living a conscious, wide-awake, controlled life. Human beings possess instinct and intelligence. In animals usually the instinct is very sure, but this is not true of human intelligence. What a tremendously controlled life animals lead! Man and animal are different manifestations of the one undivided Principle.

Our spiritual powers are lying dormant. They are to be manifested, to be made use of for the evolution of our soul, leading to the realization of Truth.

Try to receive the message from inside. Try to be in tune with the Divine in you. Then you are in tune with others. First there is inner harmony, then there comes outer harmony. First there is inner discord, then there is outer discord. It is better to have this inner harmony consciously. Thus we acquire a steady mood and cease to be pitiable weathercocks.

Let us have only those powers that make us more introspective. We see others' faces better than our own. The Upaniṣad says, 'Man has been so constituted that his senses look outward.' Let our mind be introspective. Do not forget your goal. There are people who develop or attain psychic powers. But they busy themselves with other people's affairs and not with their own. In theosophy and in anthroposophy the tendency is to go too much outward. The true spiritual outlook is to know ourselves, the Divine in us, the Divine in all, and not the attainment of psychic powers. Many misuse their psychic powers. Our energy is limited, and there are many ways of wasting it. Let us direct our energy to the Divine in us.

* * *

Take a working ideal in the beginning, without losing sight of the ultimate goal. Regular studies, clear thinking, deep reflection on the problems of life, service, meditation and spiritual practice are helps to approach the highest Ideal.

Spiritual life is a current. This current must be maintained. It must not be allowed to stagnate. The very moment we allow it to stagnate, our spiritual evolution comes to an end. This stagnation — physical, intellectual and spiritual — is very dangerous in the case of spiritual aspirants. Avoid it at all costs.

Why is meditation necessary? To give food to our soul; to get rid of our limited life, of our limited consciousness, of all the darkness and ignorance that surround us on every side. And limitation is really the cause of all our misery!

Usually our life is egocentric. And in the course of this selfish life the soul one day gets tired of everything, tired of even itself. A new yearning then arises for a vaster life, a life beyond all limitations of name and form, beyond all our petty attachments, a yearning to find peace and blessedness. It is then that our spiritual life begins. It is then that a true religious sense is born in us.

* * *

We use the term 'meditation' out of courtesy. For, our present meditation is no meditation at all. What we try to do is concentration. We all have the capacity to concentrate, but we concentrate on petty things, things of the world. Why should we not use it for vaster and higher things? Why should we not make use of it to gain our freedom?

In the beginning we can only meditate for a short time. Do not simply concentrate without previous sublimation of your feelings, desires and will. Mere concentration becomes very dangerous. For some people all this is terrible drudgery, at the beginning. You can discipline your mind through *japa* or through meditation or through discrimination or through all of them combined. All these means are equally effective. What is important is that you practise any one of these. If there is real yearning, we have to struggle hard. Otherwise the soul is not satisfied. Even if we do not like it, we must pass through a regular daily routine.

* * *

Our mind should be fresh, dynamic, alive. The essential thing is to have mental freshness. Inner freshness is most essential. The soul is neither young nor old. If we only know how to draw energy from the soul, the body would also be rejuvenated.

After intense meditation there comes a rush of energy, and some do not know how to direct it. We must find a higher channel. Then our mind becomes calm and free from restlessness. Sometimes we are in a questioning mood. In a higher mood we ourselves can answer these questions. Our mind is a part of the cosmic mind. Unless there be in us the thought, may be as memory, we can never understand it. That vast amount of thought, of memory, must be used for service. For instance, you have to write an article; then rise to the thought plane intensely, consciously, and you will see the thoughts flow. And then the question is, which to take up and which to reject.

Sometimes the brain is dull. Know how to create the right mood and how to get in touch with the plane of thought. Our little mind is a part of a vaster mind. The conditions of spiritual life are mental and physical. Hence the necessity of physical culture, the control of the nerve current and then of the thought current. Sometimes we can rise even above our ordinary possibilities. Often we can rise above our physical limitations.

* * *

The trouble is that our mind is too outgoing, we are too selfish, too self-centred. So we should try to do some service to others, physical and mental. We should sacrifice something for others, in some form or other. Look at a mother's sacrifice! No one should be allowed to lead a self-centred life without making any sacrifices for others whatever form they may take. Life is a sacrifice, and can only find its fulfilment in sacrifice. Out-and-out self-centred people have no place in spiritual life.

* * *

We should never live in a fool's paradise. Our ideal should be to take things for what they are worth. And we should try to value an unpleasant truth more than a pleasant falsehood. We cannot keep ourselves blind to truth for all time to come. Some day, sooner or later, we are bound to be disillusioned. If that is so, why should we not be prepared to face the reality even now? It is our inordinate selfishness, our inordinate clinging to the pleasant, all our petty attachments and impulses, that make us hide all the ugliness under a fine varnish and then think it is all beautiful. It is owing to our attachment to sense life that we try to look upon darkness as light, upon ignorance as knowledge. It is because of this that we take the unreal to be real, the impermanent to be permanent. We seek immortality in death, happiness in misery, spirit in matter, the Infinite in the finite. We run after the mirage for quenching our thirst. We rush after the will-o'-the-wisp for getting fire and light. No wonder we are disappointed!

Our world is a world of opposites in which both good and evil, health and illness, light and darkness, pleasure and pain, heat and cold, life and death, are all facts of consciousness. These dual throngs affect us equally. Simply by thinking there is no illness, I do not become healthy; by thinking there is no darkness, I do not get light; by thinking there is no death, I cannot avoid death; by thinking there is no evil, I cannot make it disappear.

Simply by thinking he is healthy, a diseased person does not become healthy. A dark person, by thinking he is fair, does not become so. An ugly man, by thinking he is handsome, does not become charming. A miserable man, by thinking he is happy, is not able to change his lot. A poor man, by thinking he is rich, does not improve his condition.

It is self-deception to think that we are what we are not. This kind of delusion may appear pleasant for a time, but it brings us untold misery at last. The opposites are inseparable — light and darkness, pleasure and pain, heat and cold, health and disease — these always go together.

So long as we have the idea of light, we have that of darkness also; and the same is true of pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness, riches and poverty, life and death, and all other opposites — and these opposites affect us in different ways. What we want is to remain unaffected by any of them.

By one of a pair of opposites we must rise above both. We must remain untouched by both. By rising to a higher plane of consciousness, to the plane of the Divine, we can remain indifferent to the opposites. Then we neither cling to life nor are we afraid of death.

The point to note is: so long as we accept one of a pair of opposites, we must accept the other also. We cannot accept pleasure without accepting pain. We cannot accept life without accepting death. We cannot accept health without accepting disease also. But we can transcend them all and reach a plane where none of them exists. This is the real task in spiritual life, and without this realization the goal has not been reached.

Do not be pleasure seekers in the garb of spiritual aspirants.

* * *

Sometimes in the course of our practices we feel unsettled and we must try to adjust ourselves by trying to rise to the Divine. As bubbles we need constant adjustment with the ocean (God) out of which we have come.

The task of our life is to find that which does not change. In the midst of all these changes we must maintain a steady inner life. The bubble must find out its connection with the ocean. It is a search after unity in the midst of diversity, of real consciousness in the unconscious, of the spirit in matter. We must find a balance in ourselves and outside. If my head reels, the whole world seems to reel. If I have peace in me, there may be discord outside, but my peace is not affected and I may even establish some peace outside. This does not mean that we should be self-centred. Do not think: 'If someone suffers, what is that to me?' Let us sympathize, let us render some service, always. We can always do something, contribute something to the welfare of others in our own little way, even with our very limited means. But we should not lose our inner poise.

There must be spiritual adjustment between our inner life and outer life, on a higher plane. We must try to find a link between the personal God and the Infinite, and this link, we must try to find in ourselves.

Our trouble is that we do not know how to work. Right work done in the right spirit improves us intellectually, physically and also spiritually. Devotees work for God as instruments of the Divine. Your work should never be allowed to become an end in itself. You must work only to further the divine Mission. This is true worship of the Divine. By being in tune with the Divine we introduce a new element that spiritualizes our work and thereby get inner freedom and mastery. The divine Power then helps us and sustains us. We can then face the troubles of life boldly and overcome them.

* * *

If we are able to think always pure thoughts in the waking state, they will also appear in the dream state after some time. Control the waking state. Do not bother much about dreams. Manifest the soul's dynamism on higher planes. If we can surrender ourselves entirely to God, we come under the power of God. The divine Power then protects and guides us.

In deep sleep we get in touch with a wider consciousness, the cosmic Soul. Our soul then remains in tune with vast cosmic forces and this refreshes us. Inner stagnation ceases, energy flows into us, and physically and mentally we feel refreshed. As long as we can get this contact, age does not matter. But we should be able to go to the very depths of our being.

* * *

Occasional retirement from work is necessary to practise self-analysis, to see what we have: our good points and weak points. Introspection plays a great part in spiritual life. By practice this becomes habitual, and goes on along with our work. If we allow our mind to drift with the small things of life, our spiritual duties will suffer. Then there will be no concentration in our meditation. Sri Ramakrishna says, 'He who can keep the account of salt properly, can also keep the account of sugar-candy.' Do not do your duties in a haphazard way. If we meditate properly, we can work properly. Work and meditation are inter-related. Do everything in life with as much care as possible. Nothing is too low for us and nothing is too high. If we work for a good cause sincerely, we feel uplifted, we feel great peace and joy. Sometimes we progress in spiritual life more through service than through meditation. If we are easygoing in work, we shall be easygoing in meditation also.

* * *

Take the early morning for meditation. Pray in the evening. Go to sleep in a prayerful mood. Meditate with a clear mind. Six hours' sleep is sufficient. Read and study daily two hours at the minimum. Follow your *guru's* instructions conscientiously.

Sometimes when we see suffering and misery, we are inclined to brood over them instead of doing active service. That is the time when we should have greater self-control. Vivekananda used to say, 'We have no time to cry'. We must act. That is real heroism.

Do not brood over troubles. That only makes matters worse. Try to get over the trouble calmly, in a balanced way. Overcome your restlessness. Control it as much as you can. Physical ill-health, mental restlessness, dullness, are hindrances. Even when we are in these states, we should not stop our spiritual practice.

Cling to God more than to the world, and you will get strength. It is the most practical way. We need balance, inner harmony. We need a change of attitude towards ourselves and towards the world. Have the right attitude and rise above death and miseries. We hope that after some days the sun will shine again. This false hope is a concession to our weakness. The miseries of life actually help us. Try to turn defeat into victory. If we cling to the world, we cannot rise above it. In a devotee there must be heroic fervour. There should be kindness and sympathy along with this strength. Hardness and ruthlessness are always a sign of weakness. The really strong are kind and full of sympathy. Trust in God, be in tune with Him, and at the same time face the realities of life. Learn how to remain unaffected.

Depression is due to a wrong view of life. We should be prepared to meet constant struggles, to grow through them, and finally to rise above them. In this way we further our progress. First we need the right mental attitude, intellectual attitude, and then we should make it practical, a part of our whole being. Rise above your troubles. Troubles are good if they make us think of the Lord. Face the troubles and rise above them.

Suppose you cannot rid yourselves of a thought. Just have the opposite higher idea or thought. Think that thought intensely. Throw out the lower thought by a higher thought. This is sublimation of the right type.

Truth often comes as a shock. After the shock we get light, and then we stick to the Divine. Evil is sometimes a blessing in disguise. Love of the Divine makes us unattached. It does not make us inactive. He who loves the Divine does not work as a slave, but as a master.

Often after failure you get depressed. Learn to depend more on the Divine than on failure and success. Even if we do not attain success in any activity, if we have really striven to our utmost, we have furthered the evolution of the soul, we have come nearer to the Divine. That is success at the spiritual plane; that more than compensates our material failures. But in the beginning, firm determination and grit are often necessary.

The perennial springs of our life are continually flowing. We must get in touch with them. Whenever the spiritual aspirant feels stagnation or monotony, he should forget his own little self and try to get in touch with the cosmic Self. When you are very sad, do not cry. Yearn for the Divine. Divine discontent takes us nearer to the Divine.

* * *

When I see the huge churches and cathedrals in Europe, I ask myself: What happened to the spirituality of the country? Europe was once full of monks and nuns. It produced great religious movements, monastic orders, great saints. What happened to the spirituality accumulated through the ages? It has all been converted into brick and paint. The spectacular achievements of science and technology, art and politics, have drawn heavily on the spiritual reserves of Europe. For the last two or three hundred years spiritual life has been neglected. Material life, physical enjoyment, has become the primary concern of the people. Nothing more has been contributed to the original fund of spirituality. As a result, the whole spiritual atmosphere in Europe has been lost. Other powers have risen in the place of spiritual power. The present destruction (World War II) is a result of this.

The same fate may overtake India if it neglects its spirituality. Through perfect moral life and intense spiritual practice the great spiritual reserves of the nation must be constantly replenished. The heritage of countless *ṛṣis*, sages and saints should not be frittered away. Every man must contribute something to the common spiritual atmosphere. This is the duty of all thoughtful Indians.

* * *

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